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*Masjids, Ashrams and Mazars: Transnational Sufism and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship*

By

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Department of Religion and Culture in the Faculty of Arts

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for

Doctorate of Philosophy in Religion and Culture

Wilfrid Laurier University

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## **Abstract**

The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship is a community that formed in relation to the Tamil teacher Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen (d. 1986). Bawa's teachings attracted diverse followers- those with Islamic inclinations, those from Jewish, Hindu and Christian backgrounds, and those seeking to transcend religious creeds. With his passing and no appointed successor, the communities that developed during Bawa Muhaiyaddeen's lifetime rely now on the institutions and spaces established by him. These include a mosque and burial shrine (*mazar*) in Pennsylvania and an *ashram* and shrine in Sri Lanka. This case study of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship and its parallel institutional developments in Sri Lanka known as the Serendib Sufi Study Circle maps the flows and networks of people between these sacred spaces of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen. The movements between lands, spaces, cultures and religions signal to the dialogical encounters between Sufism in a non-religious and non-creedal form of universalism, concurrently with its development as a reality of Islamic mysticism. In mapping these ebbs and flows, this study critically illuminates the diverse manifestations of Sufism, not only in North America, but also in a global context.

## Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without all the members of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship and the Serendib Sufi Study Circle from Sri Lanka (the matron, Engineer Thambi) to Toronto (Roshan Jamal, Nur Sharon Marcus and Judiya) to Philadelphia (imam Muhammad Abdur Razzaq, Hamzabibi Applebaum Dale, Janie Posner, Michael Green, the Ganeshans and John Barnett) and many, many more who welcomed me into their homes and shared meals with me and let me walk with them on pilgrimages. In so doing you entrusted me to carry your stories of Bawa. I thank you for this trust and I hope I have done it justice.

I would also like to thank my family, especially my sisters Merline and Mary who taught me how to be brave. Friends along the way have kept me grounded and took care of me in so many ways: Maxie, Shane, Zabeen, Rachel and Sahir, thank you so much. At Wilfrid Laurier, the list of people to thank is endless. William Rory Dickson readied the path with his own study of Sufi leaders in North America, without him I would not have been able to easily enter this world as I did. Without Amarnath Amarasingam, I would not have had the courage to trek the daunting terrain of our *sonta orr* (ancestral village) in Sri Lanka. A special thank you also to Sarah Morgan and Shanelle Kandiah for their help with transcriptions.

I extend my gratitude to Amila Buturovic of York University, who first introduced me to Islamic Mysticism in her undergraduate seminar and encouraged me to pursue graduate studies. To all the faculty members in the joint Religious Diversity Program at Laurier-Waterloo University, especially Janet McLellan, Michel Desjardins, David Seljak and Carol Duncan, thank you for what you do. Funding from the Department of Religion and Culture, the Faculty of Arts Deans Office and the Graduate and Post Graduate Studies at Wilfrid Laurier, along with Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS) made this research possible.

I specially want to thank Doris Jakobsh, Jason Neelis, Nathan Funk and Gisela Webb who supported me with kindness and encouragement. Thank you also for patiently reading earlier drafts of this project and helping me refine it with your vast insights. And last and most certainly not the least, this project is what it is, with any errors being solely my own, due to the grace of my supervisor Meena Sharify-Funk. Meena believed in this project and me before I ever did. She stood by me and guided me patiently with encouragement, love and support. She welcomed me into her home and taught me the value of balanced and holistic knowledge that honoured dialogue while striving towards service to others. Without her mentorship and friendship this study would not have come into fruition.

In his final breaths my Thatha (grandfather) brought me back home to Kayts, Sri Lanka. In guiding me and sharing his legacy, he taught me about his origins, one that included the story of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen. It was their collective legacies that provided me with a new story of Sri Lanka. One that was not drenched in the blood of violence and hate that tore a country apart, but one that moved beyond difference to honour a shared humanity. I dedicate this to them.

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## Introduction

In the rolling hills of Pennsylvania in Amish farm country stands an unusual structure. It has a large white dome and four doors pointed to the four cardinal directions. The presence of this building almost evokes a non-existent Mughal past. This structure is a *mazar* (burial shrine) and it contains the remains of Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen (d. 1986), a teacher who arrived in Philadelphia in October 1971 from Jaffna, Sri Lanka. In Philadelphia, his charismatic leadership and teachings formed the foundation of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. With his death he was entombed in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, where property already existed for the burial of members of this community. This shrine, however, has gained popularity beyond the immediate Fellowship. It has become a site of pilgrimage for Muslims living in North America, who seek to replicate the practice of *ziyara*, or visitation to graves of Sufi saints, as a means to access God.

In Sufi parlance graves of saints are understood as being transformative. The blessing sought by a devotee who approaches a tomb of a Sufi saint is based on the understanding that she/he is partaking of the grace or blessings (*baraka*) released by the holy figure's union with God (Werbner 2003; Ho 2006; Kugle 2007; Green 2007; Pemberton 2004; Bhardwaj 1998). This practice exists because it is understood that saints supplicate prayers on behalf of the adherent. Though communities of following have formed in the living presence of Sufi figures, it is in their death that they are solidified as saintly beings that emit blessings, forming dynamic nodes within networks of pilgrimage and ritual activity. Tombs of saints, then, are the epicenters of ritual performances and acts of personal piety amongst diverse religious supplicants. With Bawa's burial tomb in Pennsylvania, tomb practices historically associated with Sufism in regions such as the Middle East and South Asia now form a central thread of lived Sufism in North America.



For the members of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, however, the practice of shrine visitation is also institutionalized in the root of this transnational community in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. Bawa's *mazar* in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, is linked to the shrine known as Mankumban in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. Mankumban sits amidst the archipelago of islands off the northern tip of Sri Lanka on Velanai Island. Situated on the shore of Chaddy Beach, this *masjid-mazar* (mosque-shrine) complex is dedicated to Maryam, the mother of Isa (Jesus) by Bawa. It was the first institution established by Bawa. This complex is known variously as "God's House," a mosque (*palli*) and a spiritual grave to Maryam and Bawa. In Islam, Maryam, the mother of the Prophet Isa (Jesus), is viewed as an exemplary and holy figure, on par with other females such as the wife of the Prophet Muhammad, Khadija or their daughter Fatima. For Bawa, Maryam represents one of the heights of God's creation, as her servitude and reverence for God is a model for all of humanity to emulate.

Bawa's death and subsequent burial in 1986 was a time when Bawa's first institutions in Sri Lanka, and especially the region of Jaffna, were embroiled in ethnic riots and violence. Sri Lanka is the landscape wherein in ethno-political conflicts unfolded for nearly three decades, and only subsided in 2009. In America, though, Bawa's physical passing and burial led to the rejuvenation of lived Sufism in ways unimagined for his immediate disciples. In his corporeal death, Bawa would join Jaffna with Coatesville both physically and metaphysically for his disciples and pilgrims from all walks of life for years to come. The case study of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship and its parallel institutional developments in Sri Lanka within the Serendib Sufi Study Circle is an example of the historical precedent of Sufism and its contemporary manifestations, one that captures local dynamics of Islam and Sufism, and global renditions of these practices into new regions, where they are further transformed and re-

translated. The flows between lands, cultures and religious contexts highlight the dialogical encounters between Sufism in non-religious and non-creedal form of universalism, concurrent with its development as a reality of Islamic mysticism. Where Sufism in North America has developed in the realm of universal and Islamic traditions, it has also been criticized by those who hold anti-Sufi sentiments from some quarters of the Muslim communities, and is further polarized by the climate of Islamophobia globally.

In the process of these internal and external negotiations, Sufism is positioned against questions that ask whether it is authentically Islamic. Although scholarship and those in the community contend with these questions of legitimacy and orthodoxy, this inherent plurality has been the acclaim of Sufism in its historical and formative periods across Islamic civilizations, and it should not come as a surprise that it is any different as it has deeply rooted itself in North America. It is at the intersection of these negotiations that the Fellowship is situated, serving as a formative case study to understanding Sufism in contemporary contexts. This study asks what the Fellowship is. Who forms the Fellowship? What sub-spaces have developed around this community? How is this community connected to a global reality? And who is Bawa? What is the story of the figure buried in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, with origins in Jaffna?

In seeking answers to these questions, it is evident that the story of Bawa in Coatesville expands out into new spaces and epicenters in the transnational community of the Fellowship, but Bawa's legacy also draws within itself new stories of pilgrims from North America and beyond. These networked spaces capture two distinctive localities, one American and the other Sri Lankan, and the ongoing negotiations of movements and performances of rituals and practices in these distinct but interconnected spaces signal to the complexities of shrine spaces, rituals and authority and their place in Sufism and Islam. Mankumban in Jaffna, linked to

Bawa's *mazar* in Coatesville further highlights the nuances of shrine culture and networks within transnational Sufi communities (Cooke and Lawrence 2005; Malik and Hinnells 2006; Ho 2006; Werbner 2003; Stenberg and Raudvere 2009; Mandeville 2001; Geaves, Dressler et al. 2009; Grewal 2013).

The Fellowship is an organization and an institution, but in this study it is treated as a community, as a means to experience its full breadth that is inclusive of Sri Lanka. In this way, though institutional definitions persist, the focus of the study is to engage with the inherent diversity as represented by its members and enacted in rituals and spaces. The exploration of the two parallel shrines of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen illustrates an example of a transnational and global Sufi community in the twenty-first century. It captures new networks of Sufism, while recalling old existing ones so often forgotten. These shrines summon us to reflect on movement in and through spaces across vast regions. Through this mobility, rituals and pieties are experienced, all the while exemplifying the diversity of Bawa's disciples. The mapping of the disciples of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship through sacred spaces and its subsequent networks of communities characterizes Sufism as it is lived, transformed and translated in contemporary Islam and beyond.

### **Nature of Research**

In 2008 during my undergraduate studies at York University in Toronto, Canada, I experienced the Fellowship for the first time through the Toronto Branch. Since then I attended events at the Toronto Branch, which became my site of most familiarity. It was only after beginning my doctoral work, that I visited Philadelphia for the first time in early July 2012. Since my first visit, I intermittently visited the Fellowship throughout my doctoral studies, especially during holy

days, such as Bawa's death anniversary (*urs*) or birthday celebrations for the Prophet Muhammad (*mawlid*s). I also participated in Boston retreats held by the Boston Fellowship Branch, which took place during a weekend in Deerfield, Massachusetts in 2013 and 2014, while continuing to maintain regular attendance at the Toronto Branch. Even though I speak about the Fellowship as being headquartered in Philadelphia, the Fellowship as a whole is also beyond Philadelphia, as evident in the American and Canadian cities of my own travels to meet with Fellowship members and to take part in meetings, discourses and commemorative anniversaries.

My early visits to the Fellowship soon prompted curiosity about the Serendib Sufi Study Circle (SSSC), the Sri Lankan parallel to the Fellowship that was first formed by Bawa, and so I wanted to experience this community to understand the development of the Fellowship in North America. As a result, I spent two months completing fieldwork in Sri Lanka from July to August 2013 as part of my doctoral research. In Sri Lanka I divided my time between Colombo, where the center of the Serendib Sufi Study Circle is located, and Jaffna, in the north. In Jaffna, I spent the most concentrated time in the *ashram* (residence) of Bawa and Mankumban. I did this first at the beginning of my trip in early July for Ramadan and then I also joined a pilgrimage group that consisted of disciples of Bawa from North America, Saudi Arabia and Sri Lanka as they travelled to Jaffna. I also visited Matale, another branch of the Serendib Sufi Study Circle once, which is located in central Kandy and the newly refurbished farm of Bawa in Puliyankulam twice during my time in Jaffna. I did not travel to Puttalam, where majority of the Muslims displaced from Jaffna live in internally displaced camps. I met some of these Muslim refugees who are disciples of Bawa at the *dhikr* (prayer of remembrance) at the end of August 2013 in Colombo.

Upon my return to Toronto from my fieldwork in Sri Lanka, I conducted interviews with members of the Toronto Branch, while continuing to study Bawa's discourses in Tamil. Thereafter, I spent April 2014 living on the same street as the Fellowship in Philadelphia and participated in all the activities, from weeknight meetings to *jum'ah* prayers. Members of the Fellowship graciously invited me over to their homes for dinner or shared tea with me both at their homes and in local coffee shops. They spoke openly and passionately about Bawa at length. Some of these conversations developed organically and so I did not record it to sully the moment, but rather I documented details in my field journal when I returned home. Interviews that were recorded were in the form of semi-structured interviews. My semi-structured interviews were pre-arranged based on meeting members at the Fellowship or at the suggestion of senior disciples at the Fellowship who recommended I contact certain fellow disciples to capture their experiences. This led to a method of snowball sampling.<sup>1</sup>

During 2013-2014 of my fieldwork year, I completed twenty-three recorded semi-structured interviews in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I also finished nine semi-structured interviews in Toronto, Canada, which consisted of members mainly from the Toronto Branch of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship and one interview via Skype with a member of the Fellowship who lives in Florida, United States. I also maintained email correspondence with leaders and members of the Fellowship in Boston, Toronto and Philadelphia. Of the total thirty-two recorded interviews that took place in North America, thirty-one interviewees were North American members (i.e., Canadians and Americans) who were religiously Muslim (Sunni and

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<sup>1</sup> This is a methodology wherein one uses one's initial contacts who help the researcher connect with more members. The researcher then works within already existing networks and relations.

Shi'a)<sup>2</sup>, Hindu, Jewish and Christian (Catholic and other deonominations). Still, all of them identified as being Sufi or found affinity to Sufism through Bawa and the Fellowship, though the ways in which they articulated this varied, as this study captures. Ethnically, members were Euro-American, African-American, East African Indian, Pakistani, Iranian and Sri Lankan Tamil, while the two remaining interviewees lived and worked in Saudi Arabia, though one was originally from Pakistan and the other was a Sri Lankan Muslim. Some conversations that did take place were strictly off the record as per wishes of those who shared their experiences of Bawa and the Fellowship with me. And I have respected the wishes of these individuals and have not included them in the official count of interviewees. I am mindful of their perspectives throughout my analysis and I try my best to encapsulate the diverse voices of the Fellowship throughout my study and not privilege one over another.

In Sri Lanka the political and social climate and the spaces I was engaged in necessitated participant observation as my main form of data gathering. Though I spoke with varying senior disciples of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen in Colombo, Jaffna, Matale and Puliyanikulam, these interviews were not recorded, as they were in North America. I kept detailed field journals for the entirety of my time in Sri Lanka, which I utilize throughout this study in the form of field notes. In the

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<sup>2</sup> The two main sectarian differences in Islam are Sunni and Shi'a. Sunnis make up the majority of Muslims (currently estimated at around 85%). They are generally defined as those Muslims who accept the religio-political legitimacy of Muhammad's closest companions as successors (Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, and 'Ali). Under the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties that followed these successors, a "Sunni consensus" formed around four schools of law (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali), two schools of theology (Ash'ari and Maturidi), with a general acceptance of Sufism as the spiritual/inward aspect of Islam. Shi'a Muslims, on the other hand, understand that it was the "people of the house" or the family of the Prophet who were to be the religious leaders after Muhammad's death. As such, they understand that the successor to the Prophet Muhammad was his son-in-law and cousin Ali. They are further divided in interpretations over lineage of descendants of the Ali and include Zaydis (followers of Zayd ibn 'Ali ibn al-Husayn and found in Yemen), Ismailis (followers of Ja'far al-Sadiq's eldest son Ismail and found in South Asia, East Africa and Central Asia) and IthnaAshari (who believe in twelve imams, and the occultation of the twelfth Imam Muhammad al-Mahdi, who will return at the end of time). Shi'a Muslims follow the Jafari School of law.

Colombo and Matale sites, the members were mainly Sri Lankan Muslims, while in Jaffna and Puliyanikulam devotees were mainly Tamil Hindus, with a few Tamil Catholics.

Where I was able to complete recorded interviews with members of the Fellowship, this was not entirely possible with non-Fellowship visitors and pilgrims whom I encountered at the Fellowship house. These were usually one time visitors that I met while eating a meal in the meeting hall, sometimes language was a barrier, but between their broken English and my lack of Urdu (or several other languages) we attempted to converse. At other times gender was a barrier (i.e., I usually could only access females). This meant that encounters with this portion of my participants were recorded in my field notes, which I also glean from throughout. At the *mazar*, the situation was the same. It was not possible to pull out my recorder and ask for an interview when pilgrims drove hours to come to the *mazar* from near the Eastern Seaboard, nearby states or even from England. It is for this reason that when speaking of these spaces, I employ thick description (Geertz 1971). The interviews woven in with thick description forms the basis of the study and it highlights the multidimensional ways in which I experienced the diverse spaces, peoples and rituals within Bawa's communities. To supplement my thick description and my interviews, I also include photographs from my fieldwork throughout the study to help readers envision the spaces I encountered.

Fieldwork for this project has been an ongoing enterprise and thus multi-faceted and multi-sited. The multi-sited nature of this study meant that my position and relationship with my project and those whom I regularly interacted with from Toronto to Philadelphia to Jaffna required constant negotiation. This negotiation meant that at times I was an insider and outsider, and other times solely an outsider or an insider. The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship and the Serendib Sufi Study Circle are both open spaces where people with diverse religious and cultural

identities are welcomed. This is a reality in both contexts, as Bawa's teachings and spaces were given openly, and not restricted to "initiated" members, or initiated Muslim members, as some Sufi *tariqas* (orders) are. As such, I was eagerly welcomed. Most were, however, critical of my attempt to "academize" Bawa, because for devotees of Bawa it was precisely the intellectual and the rational that needed to be abandoned in order to grasp the truth that Bawa brought, a truth which required "heart knowledge" according to senior disciples of Bawa. Of course some welcomed my academic interests to the study of Bawa and the Fellowship. But where my academic pursuits served as a limitation for me to "experience" Bawa, it was my Tamil identity and my place of birth that seemed to remedy the fact that I was a researcher.

Many followers felt that my shared ethnic and cultural ancestry of their spiritual teacher and of being from Kayts, which is a town on Velanai Island, the same island as Mankumban, was not coincidental but rather signaled to Bawa's continual spiritual presence or his "hand" in the completion of my research project. Initially I was happy with sharing an ancestry with the Fellowship's spiritual teacher if it meant that I could directly access Bawa and his followers, but when this significance was interpreted in spiritual ways, I became overwhelmed. Fellowship members often introduced me as "Shobhana from Mankumban" at which point I would interject and state "actually, I am from Toronto."

In Sri Lanka, the significance of my Tamil identity was far more complex. As a diaspora female Tamil-Canadian and a researcher my presence in the larger social milieu of Sri Lanka was difficult to navigate. Diaspora members are looked on with suspicion by the Sri Lankan government due to the various ethno-political challenges unfolding in Sri Lanka and the support of Tamil nationalism and separatism amongst diaspora communities, especially in Canada. In northern Sri Lanka, the site of intense warring for the past three decades, the Sri Lankan



government maintains an authoritarian presence through heavy militarization. This was a difficult reality to enter into, one that no amount of preparation and coursework can prepare a doctoral student for. My first fieldwork trip was meant only to be a preliminary visit to see if research could be navigated at all, and if it was deemed too difficult, I was to return to my thesis to reorient my project. In the end, my visit during July to August 2013 was the only time I was able to conduct fieldwork in Sri Lanka as incidences, such as the attack of the Grandpass Mosque in Colombo in August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013, created heightened security concerns amongst the Muslims in Sri Lanka but also concern for a researcher who may be interested in documenting it. Regardless, this initial visit was still a fruitful experience, even though it was limited and so I include Sri Lanka in my study as it contributes new dimensions to understanding the Fellowship.

Once I arrived at the *ashram*, my being Tamil was invaluable. Members of the Fellowship informed the matron of the *ashram* of my arrival. Being a Jaffna-Tamil female meant that the matron and I were able to connect directly. The matron welcomed me and adjusted to my presence at the *ashram* to the extent that I was cutting vegetables in the back kitchen, a task usually given to the local women who assist in the *ashram*. My ability to access the *ashram* to this capacity is one of the contributions of this study, made possible by my own identity.

At the Fellowship in Philadelphia, Bawa's room was the space that was most accessible to me throughout my research, though I spent time in all the spaces. Bawa's room, like the *ashram* in Jaffna, was a space that I spent time listening to discourses, reading his books and meeting diverse disciples. In Philadelphia though, my gender played a more immediate role in how I experienced the spaces of the Fellowship, a reality that was not evident in my experience in Jaffna. The *masjid* required modest attire for all females at all times, not only during *salat*

(prayers).<sup>3</sup> Women were not allowed to enter if they were on their menses or with young children who wore diapers. The protocol regarding women on menses was also kept at the *mazar* and at the *ashram*, though no one necessarily controlled this practice. Throughout my research I spent most of my time in Bawa's room where my presence, sometimes veiled, sometimes not, sometimes in jeans and other times in long skirts, often went unnoticed. If special events did take place in Bawa's room, gender boundaries were created, modesty was maintained and veiling (however loosely) was expected.<sup>4</sup>

As George E. Marcus<sup>5</sup> writes "In practice, multi-sited fieldwork is thus always conducted with a keen awareness of being within the landscape, and as the landscape changes across sites, the identity of the ethnographer requires renegotiation" (Marcus 1995, 112). Zareena Grewal<sup>6</sup> further adds that "[...] fieldwork is defined in terms of a politics of location, of shifting insides and outsides, of affiliations and distances" and this shifting of positionalities captures my own movement throughout my research (2013, 17). Throughout my fieldwork I viewed ethnography as "[...] a process of reflective participation rather than participant-observation" which "undid anthropology's oxymoron of fieldwork, in which participation involves communication and

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<sup>3</sup> *Salat*, or *namaz* in Persian, is prayer or worship. It is one of the pillars of Islam, or requirements of Muslims. The exact amount varies according to different sectarian communities within Islam, but for most Sunni Muslims it is performed five times throughout the day. It consists of (1) daybreak (*fajr*) (2) noon (*duhr*) (3) midafternoon (*asr*) (4) sunset (*maghreb*) and (5) evening (*isha*). The exact times of these prayers depends on geography and time of the year, as it is dependent on the sun's position. These prayers are usually performed individually at home, while the Friday noon prayer (*jum'ah*) is performed as a community at the *masjid* (mosque).

<sup>4</sup> I did get advice from some male and female disciples of Bawa who encouraged my hair to be covered, as per their interpretation of Bawa's teachings.

<sup>5</sup> George E. Marcus is a Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Rice University in Houston, Texas. His areas of research are on culture theory, comparative cultural studies and contemporary transnational cultural formations. He has completed ethnography of elite groups and the development of middle-classes cross-culturally, and of intellectuals, along with peoples and cultures of Oceania.

<sup>6</sup> Zareena Grewal is an Associate Professor of American Studies and Religious Studies at Yale University. She is a historical anthropologist and a documentary filmmaker. Her area of interests includes race, gender, religion, nationalism, and transnationalism across a wide spectrum of American Muslim communities. She is the author of *Islam is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority* (2013), which explores transnational Muslim networks from American mosques and movements to the Middle East. Her first film was *By the Dawn's Early Light: Chris Jackson's Journey to Islam* (2004).

emotional investment and observation requires detachment and objectivity” (Grewal 2013, 73). As such, present before the readers are my reflective participation as a researcher of a movement in time. It is for this reason that I include my voice in each section’s introduction and throughout the study to orient my own experience as a researcher with disciples in Bawa’s spaces and how this influenced my analysis of this community. Suha Taji-Farouki<sup>7</sup> writes:

The history of every spiritual movement is multilayered. The outsider observes specific origins, episodes and events. Then there are experiences of these, captured in intimate memories. These are the preserve of those who participated, protagonists in the unfolding drama. Alongside this is an interior history. This is accessible only to those with the vision of the committed, and an understanding shaped by the movement’s worldview (Taji-Farouki 2007, 23).

My access to the Fellowship and its networks of communities is then dependent on the foundational premise that it is a “multilayered” movement, and I as an institutional outsider to this community have been given access to certain historical archives and in the process experienced “episodes and events” via members’s perception. Thomas Tweed<sup>8</sup> (2006) further asserts that scholars and students of religions have access to moments in time that capture

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<sup>7</sup> Suha Taji-Farouki is a Senior Lecturer in Modern Islam and Director of the Centre for the Study of Islam at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter. Her interests are on modern Islamic thought and its diversity. These include Islamists to Islamic liberals and traditionalist-Sufis especially as they unfold over issues of authority. Currently she is working on tracing the significance of the shrine-complex of Ibn ‘Arabi in Damascus prior to the civil war as a means to understand debates between Sufis and their opponents.

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“truths” that cross boundaries and dwell in simultaneous realms. Access and experience depend on a particular point in the journey, and so all journeys of scholars are not similar. In this regard, what is captured in the pages that follow is dependent on a journey that I experienced of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship and the Serendib Sufi Study Circle. This journey itself was crafted because of the “chains, paths, threads” of Bawa’s transnational communities and my mapping of it (Marcus 1995, 105).

### **Outline of Present Study**

The overall dissertation is divided into three main sections. Section I situates the focus of the study, which is the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. This section builds towards the space of significance introduced above, the *mazar* of Bawa in Pennsylvania. Section II moves on to explore the parallel community of significance in Sri Lanka and Section II also crescendos to the *mazar* found on Velanai Island. The institutional history of the Fellowship and biographical details of Bawa’s life are also interwoven into the description of the spaces presented throughout Section I and II. Section III of the study moves on to engage with the spaces, rituals and peoples experienced in the first two sections thematically. Each Section includes an introduction, which is prefaced with a vignette taken from my field journal to capture my own voice. Below I give further details of each chapter.

Chapter 1 provides the context to the Fellowship in North America. The unique development of Sufism in North America was influenced by the reception of Persian poetry by Orientalists, who presented Sufism as other than Islam, while Sufi leaders, such as Hazrat Inayat Khan (d. 1927), further built upon these poetic Sufi traditions by institutionalizing the master-student relationship. Sufism then would be represented not only in Sufi poetry in translation but

also through lived Sufi teachers, who helped spread Sufism in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. The development of Sufism is further externally influenced by factors that polarize Islam. These external factors include the globalization and diversification of Sufism in North America in light of the growth of Islamophobia. Internally within Islam, however, are further currents that have given rise to anti-Sufi sentiments, which challenge Sufism and those who adhere to it. This has been the case with ISIS or ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). This movement's attacks on non-Muslims and other Muslims, along with the destruction of historic sites, such as tombs of holy figures and Muslim saints in its regions, are an example of the consequences of anti-Sufi outlooks. In this global climate develops the Fellowship, a community that has been variously identified as a Sufi, Muslim and non-Muslim Sufi movement, and also a North American and South Asian community.

Chapter 2 contextualizes the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship Headquarters in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Though the members of the community do not refer to it as the headquarters, I ascribe it this label (Headquarters) so as to distinguish it as the center of activity in Philadelphia and subsequently in North America as a whole. The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, contains numerous sub-spaces, such as Bawa's room, the meeting hall, bookstore and publication house, a kitchen and a *masjid* (mosque). Often the *masjid* of the Fellowship draws the most attention, both within the community and in the scholarship of the Fellowship. But my research indicates that the *masjid* is just one facet of the larger complex that is the Fellowship, wherein various ritual activities unfold. These include the commemoration of birthdays (*mawlid*s) of the Prophet Muhammad or Abdul Qadir Jilani (d. 1166) and the death anniversary (*urs*) of Bawa. My exploration of the Fellowship Headquarters in Philadelphia is completed in Chapter 3's focus on the *mazar* (burial shrine) of Bawa.

In Chapter 3 I argue that Bawa's *mazar* is the most notable site within this movement in North America, especially as it has gained popularity beyond the Fellowship. I situate the various spaces that form the *mazar* complex, which includes a welcome center, and a flower and vegetable garden. The Fellowship members utilize this space for ritual purposes, such as to perform daily *dhikr*, or the prayer of remembrance. In this chapter I also capture the narratives of non-Fellowship pilgrims who complete pilgrimages to the *mazar* from across North America. In my analysis of this distinct sacred site, I illustrate the diverse approaches to the uses of the *mazar*, specifically for members of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship and, in recent development, for non-Fellowship members who seek blessings (*baraka*) from a Sufi teacher. The arrival of new Muslim pilgrims to the *mazar* of Bawa has transformed the Tamil Sufi teacher from Sri Lanka to the Pennsylvania Sufi of America.

In Section II, I address if the trends noted in Bawa's North American communities are indeed unique to North America or a consequence of Bawa's ministry specifically. In understanding the Sri Lankan context of this community, the broader spaces of this movement is situated, wherein it is not merely a North American or South Asian phenomenon, which in many ways it has localized into, but a transnational one. In order to explore this, Chapter 4 shifts the landscape from America to Sri Lanka, especially with an emphasis on Sufism and Islam in Sri Lanka. In this chapter I draw attention to the heightened and polarizing tendencies within Muslim communities between those inclined towards pieties of Sufism and those orientated towards reformist movements as Sri Lanka aims to write a new future with a united national and ethnic identity, privileging its Sinhala Buddhist majority.

The second half of the chapter situates the current climate of Islam in Sri Lanka, particularly in light of growing persecution against Muslim communities, businesses and sacred

spaces. The chapter concludes by engaging with sacred sites, such as Sufi shrines, which have become centers of political contestations. To understand the context in which Bawa and his communities in Jaffna and Colombo emerged and continue to develop it is significant to comprehend the distinct situation of Muslims in Sri Lanka and Sufism in relation to these broader political, ethnic and religious currents. Despite the varied cultural, historical and religious contexts of Sri Lanka in relation to the United States, similarities such as Islamophobia and anti-Sufi sentiments are also evident in Sri Lanka.

Chapter 5 lays the foundation for Bawa's Sri Lankan institution, the Serendib Sufi Study Circle (SSSC). Though the SSSC would be the legal and official label under which Bawa's spaces developed, Chapter 5 points out that Bawa's earliest and first space was his residence (*ashram*) in Jaffna. It remains the important site for daily ritual activity. However, Bawa's *ashram* does not have the sacred capital that Mankumban has on Velanai Island. His Tamil and American disciples eventually completed this *masjid-mazar* complex that Bawa began to construct. I situate this *masjid-mazar* space by noting ritual activities but I also illustrate some of the many interpretations of its use and its connotation for both local devotees and for pilgrims who come to its threshold. I conclude that these spaces host a vibrant Hindu and Muslim demographic. In tracing the phenomenon of Bawa's community from Pennsylvania to Jaffna, this section highlights that diversity and plurality, though they manifest distinctly due to regional contexts, is prevalent in Jaffna, the site of Bawa's first ever institutions. These findings then allow Section III of the study to revisit North American Sufism.

These two religious communities, with their respectively diverse followers but parallel institutional spaces, are in effect dependent on Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen. With the physical passing of Bawa, the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship (BMF) and the Serendib Sufi

Study Circle (SSSC) continue to hold Bawa as the sole authority of the community, especially as Bawa appointed no successor prior to his death. Engaging with the question who is Bawa, Chapter 7 seeks to understand this living presence of Bawa as interpreted by his varying disciples. In this chapter, Bawa's disciples' responses are categorized according to diverse honorifics or titles that Bawa gained both in his life and in his death. These include *swami* (lord), *guru*, *shaykh*, *Qutb* (axial pole) and *insan al-kamil* (perfected being).

Chapter 8 enters into a much-needed discussion of women in Sufism in North America, by utilizing what was gleaned from gender practices in Bawa's spaces in Sri Lanka. In early scholarship of Sufism in North America it is proposed that women in Sufi communities in North America have experienced more egalitarian presence in practice and leadership than their counterparts in lands where Sufism was established. I test this trend within the Fellowship and the Circle. I suggest that though women are active in the Fellowship and maintain an engaged presence, be it through the leading of discourse meetings and the holding of executive positions institutionally, one finds that this presence is not unique to the American context. It is in Jaffna that I encountered a matron of the *ashram*, who is a ritual leader and shrine caretaker, in close proximity to Mankumban, which is a shrine devoted to Maryam. Both the leadership of the matron at the *ashram* and the memorialization of a shrine to Maryam stand at the epicenter of Bawa's community in Sri Lanka. These roles and spaces capture the authority of women in Sufism and the significance of femininity as a form of exemplary metaphysical state, a tradition found in some classical Sufism.

Chapter 9 situates a pertinent question riddling the institutional future of the communities of Bawa both in North America and in Sri Lanka. Where I began this section in emphasizing the centrality of the authority of the figure of Bawa, I end it with the uncertainty of how to go forth



when diversity is difficult to maintain without a charismatic leader to forge the way. The Fellowship Executive Committee maintains full legal authority of the Fellowship and subcommittees exist to help maintain spaces, such as the *masjid* and the *mazar*, and oversee the various activities, such as publications of Bawa's teaching. All decisions are based on the constitutions established by Bawa and or through his teachings, but Bawa was able to cater to a spectrum of followers. What then happens to these diverse followers who now must negotiate with each other's understanding of what the Fellowship and the Circle should be? What is the future of the Fellowship? And who will be its leaders in its future institutional capacity? This chapter provides some possibilities based on my observations of the Fellowship thus far.

I conclude Chapter 9 by drawing attention to a discourse that Bawa gave to his disciples when he felt institutional dissonance in his own Fellowship and this discourse is entitled "The Pond." For Bawa a pond symbolized the purpose of the Fellowship. A pond does not naturally restrict its access; it fosters an ecosystem of diversity that is sustained through water, a basic resource for all creatures and organisms. Those who come to a pond may take as much or as little water as they please. They are also welcome to stay as long or short as they choose, but the aim is to ensure that access to water is possible. In many ways Bawa and what he taught is this source of "pure water" or "truth" made available to everyone without restriction, and the pond is the system that proliferates from this water source, which is the purpose of the Fellowship. How the pond is cultivated is in the hands of time.

The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship and its parallel institution of the Serendib Sufi Study Circle, not only accentuate the global diversity of a Sufi community from Sri Lanka to the United States it also emphasizes the fluidity of a singular Sufi community which contains distinct followers of Muslims, Hindus, Jews and Christians. By illustrating the flows and networks of

people between the sacred spaces of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, which includes mosques, burial shrines and community centers, the current study elucidates the diverse manifestations of Sufism, not only in North America and South Asia, but also in a global context.

### **Note on Terminology**

Bawa discoursed in Tamil while using Arabic terms. As a result, this study utilizes Tamil and Arabic. When transliterating Arabic, I do not use diacritical dots or the *hamza* (which is indicated with a forward apostrophe in English). I have gleaned and adapted the transliteration system found in my dissertation from scholarship in the field of Sufism in North America. Scholars similarly employ this method of transliteration in their study and often use only the backward apostrophe for *ayn* (‘) (Dickson 2012, 2015; Webb 2013), which I then maintain in my own study. I do keep to the former system, unless I am directly quoting from another study or from the Fellowship’s own transliterated discourses of Bawa’s teachings, in which case I keep to the transliteration already used in the source I am citing. I also indicate its Arabic or Tamil origins by italicizing the words consistently throughout my study. For Tamil, I do not use any diacritical dots or dashes, but use a direct transliteration of the phonetic sound of Tamil. This is also to maintain consistency with the Fellowship’s published discourses and the subsequent use of these specific terms by varying disciples of Bawa. I try to maintain as much simplicity and consistency throughout as possible to make it easy for the reader.

### *Bawa's Oral and Written Discourses*

According to various estimates by Bawa's disciples, it is suggested that the Fellowship has over 15000 hours of recorded discourses by Bawa, which include his teachings, his question and answer sessions and his songs. Listening to the entirety of Bawa's discourses that are archived merely in Philadelphia or even in Jaffna was beyond the scope of this particular project. In this regard, this study is not meant to synthesize Bawa's discourses or to provide a systematic analysis of Bawa's thoughts, philosophies and cosmologies. Bawa's discourses are utilized throughout the study and are done so in order to complement and nuance a topic under consideration. For instance, when discussing the significance of the *masjid*, the concept of the *insan al-kamil* (perfect human being) or the importance of Maryam, I include Bawa's teachings, while also embedding Bawa's interpretations with classical Sufi thinkers. I do this because I recognize that Bawa's teachings were not formed in a vacuum. It is difficult to provide a definite *silsila* (lineage) for Bawa, but by engaging with his teachings in relation to similarities found amongst other classical Sufi teachers showcases that Bawa was indeed influenced by classical Sufi ideas, concepts and cosmologies. Therefore, discourses were selected based on topics and themes addressed by Bawa; this is where archival specialists and senior disciples of Bawa played a role in recommending specific discourses when I was intentionally looking for Bawa's teachings on them. I also consulted a discourse index available in Toronto or Philadelphia to search for specific discourses that were relevant to my research.

During my fieldwork, I listened to discourses played by disciples for Fellowship meetings in Philadelphia and Toronto and also as they were played in the *ashram* in Jaffna. Bawa's room in Philadelphia also has a list of all the discourses organized both chronologically from the day Bawa arrived in Philadelphia, with title of talk, the length of talk and location.

Computer databases also have these discourses topically in their systems, for example according to themes (i.e., marriage, Jesus, environment etc.). Each discourse that is databased includes the date, the length of the discourse, title, brief description (usually key words, phrases) and a numerical ID. When possible, I studied the manual (not the computerized) index and began to note patterns in the types of teachings Bawa disseminated. I treat Bawa's spoken discourse as a *primary text* while being cognizant of the setting of the discourse (i.e., was it a public venue or a private one-to-one address), the audience (to whom was it addressed i.e., the executive committee or a public audience at Harvard University) or even the year (was the discourse delivered in his early years in Philadelphia, given in Colombo or given as he neared his final days). As in any translation project, be it oral or written, there are challenges to representing the original meaning as best as possible in translation. Further levels of cultural and religious outlooks of Bawa create nuances to understanding him. Therefore, the current study, though engaging with Bawa in Tamil and being critical of *who, what, where, when* and *how* of any discourses encountered, is still limited in that it does not provide a systematic analysis of Bawa's discourses.

Moreover, Bawa's recorded discourses in both audio and video format form the primary source of Bawa's teachings, while his books, which are translated into English from his discourses and edited into book format, form the secondary sources. These recorded discourses, as they are commonly known, are central to the life of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship and the Serendib Sufi Study Circle. They are the basis of meetings that take place weekly in Colombo, Philadelphia and Toronto.<sup>9</sup> The Fellowship itself has BMF 786 Radio- Bawa 24/7 that

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<sup>9</sup> Leaders of meetings select these discourses. Most have explained to me that this is a "mystical" process. For some members, they often pray and "open" themselves to the discourse that they will play or read from. And often members also explain that it is Bawa who guided them.

streams Bawa's discourses online twenty-four hours a day seven days a week.<sup>10</sup> The Fellowship also produces a CD of the month, which is sold at the bookstore in Philadelphia or distributed to members through the monthly membership program. This process is different in Sri Lanka, especially because most of the discourses I encountered of Bawa in Sri Lanka were all on audiocassettes and not CD formats and they often do not include the English translator found in American CDs of Bawa's discourses. Some of the disciples who actively participate in the Fellowship House in Philadelphia believe that the preservation of Bawa's discourses, the editing and publication of his teachings forms the central role of the Fellowship. For them it is the only way to disseminate Bawa's teachings to those who need it beyond the Fellowship. This type of preservation though completed early on in the history of the Circle, as it led to Tamil publications, is no longer central to the Circle as it is to the Fellowship in Philadelphia.

Since Bawa's teaching play the most significant role in the Fellowship and the Circle, when I first began my research on Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, I spent my time reading through the Fellowship and Circle's book publications, such as *Islam and World Peace: Explanations of a Sufi* (1987), *The Tree that Fell to the West: Autobiography of a Sufi* (2003) or *God, His Prophets and His Children* (1987).<sup>11</sup> During my fieldwork in Philadelphia I came to realize that there are committees who select discourse topics to publish into books, resulting in a publication process and marketing aspect of the books. For instance, all the publications are sold on the Fellowship website but also at select conferences and bookshops. Sometimes this process was itself an attempt to present the Fellowship to a particular market, for instance to a Sufi or Muslim

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<sup>10</sup> The link to the Shoutcast for the Fellowship can be found at <http://www.radioforest.net/radio/bmf-786-radio-bawa-24-7/275745> (Accessed May 8, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Selections from these published books also appear in the *Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship Family Newsletter*. In addition to containing translated discourses of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, the newsletter also includes updates on Fellowship activities (i.e., such as Unity Days or Ramadan), along with personal testimonies (i.e., healings) and death, birth and wedding notices. For this particular study, these newsletters were not systematically analyzed, though those that I periodically came across were consulted.

audience. Moreover, the committees determine which discourses given by Bawa get published and which do not.<sup>12</sup> So though I initially thought that the translation of Bawa's discourses into English needed to be better assessed, I soon realized that it was not the translation from Tamil to English that was a concern (though accessing Bawa in Tamil is still necessary), but rather which discourses were to be selected to be published into books and which were not. The latter presents too many variables when wanting to access his "original" teachings. The same concern applies to his discourses published by the Serendib Sufi Study Circle (SSSC) in Sri Lanka. Bawa was reputedly illiterate. So any book that has been published has been done through his oral teachings and its translations and not written personally by him. That being said, the books completed by the SSSC or the Fellowship form a sacred corpus for the community. They are read on a weekly basis and it is through these books that are distributed to bookshops across the country and even abroad that many new disciples seeking spirituality or Sufism find Bawa and eventually connect with the Fellowship.<sup>13</sup> I have gleaned from these publications throughout my study, but where possible I give priority to the oral discourses I have directly accessed by Bawa in Tamil.

Presently, Bawa's discourses are not limited to the published books, it is critical to consider the role of Internet blogpages, Facebook groups and Youtube videos which have become another common source, beyond the control of the Fellowship, wherein individuals devoted to Bawa interpret and select his teachings, creating virtual spaces for him, creating new challenges to traditional authority in Sufism. Additional to these cyber spaces, especially of

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<sup>12</sup> Even this process of transcribing the English translations of the Tamil on audio to English for books and editing was a lengthy one which meant that a manuscript usually would take a few years to prepare and finally be printed in the Fellowship Press.

<sup>13</sup> When I spoke to members who came to the Fellowship after Bawa died, I often asked how they heard about Bawa. Most of the times the response was through a friend but another common response was through his books. For example when I spoke to a young male from Los Angeles and a South Asian family from Boston separately they both explained that they found Bawa's books at a bookshop and connected with his teachings and then came to visit the Fellowship in Philadelphia.

social media forums and personal blogs, are published memoirs and autobiographies by some of Bawa's disciples, such as Nur Sharon Marcus, Musa Muhaiyaddeen, Sitti Rahman Bibi and Maryam Kabeer Faye.<sup>14</sup> These form the broader literary corpus of known extensions of Bawa and his teachings. Therefore, it is this wide terrain of published secondary books to virtual spaces of Bawa that must be navigated to finally arrive at Bawa's teachings.

What follows throughout this study is my own *reading* of Bawa. My *reading* of Bawa is not from a devotional or insider's point of view, but as an outsider with academic interests in Sufism in Sri Lanka and North America. It is for this reason that the voices of the followers of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen are central to my study as they capture the insiders's voice of this community. My reading of Bawa is also formed by my access to Tamil. When I utilize Bawa's discourses throughout this study, I provide the full date of the discourse as a reference, along with details of title of the discourse. I do this because this is how the Fellowship archives Bawa's discourses, and so this is how I found discourses of Bawa during my research. Most of my references to Bawa are used from discourses that I have listened to myself and compared with Bawa's translators, otherwise it is indicated in the footnotes if I have not and why.

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<sup>14</sup> Nur Sharon Marcus has a series of books on Bawa Muhaiyaddeen and Sufism. For more see her website [www.sufipress.com](http://www.sufipress.com) (Accessed October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014). Sitti Rahman Bibi is another member of the Fellowship; she came to the Fellowship through her parents and met Bawa as a child. Her books include *The Wooden Hand: Treasures of an Exalted Journey* (2006) and *Pearl Flame* (2014). They are based on "visionary" experiences and teachings of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen. Musa Muhaiyaddeen (E. L. Levin) met Bawa in 1972 and stayed with him until his death. He is one of the presidents of the Fellowship. He also has written extensively on his understandings of Bawa's teachings with his own publishing press, which can be accessed via [www.thewitnesswithin.com](http://www.thewitnesswithin.com) (Accessed October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014). He is also actively involved with the International Association of Sufism of Seyyedeh Dr. Nahid Angha and Shah Nazar Dr. Ali Kianfar, members of the Uwaiysi Tarighat and an organization of the United Nations. For more see [www.isa.org](http://www.isa.org) (Accessed October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014). Shaykha Maryam Kabeer Faye's book *Journeys Through Ten Thousand Veils* (2009) is more autobiographical in nature and captures her journey as a child born into a Jewish family and her coming to find Islam through mysticism, where Bawa and the Fellowship have a significant role. Though after Bawa's death, Maryam went on to experience more *tariqas* and *shaykhs* and is now a *shaykha* in her own right.

## Section I

### The Spaces and Rituals of a Sufi Community in North America

My cellphone alarm goes off. It is 4am. I struggle to grab my phone to turn off the blaring noise. Once I finally come to my senses about where I am, I shoot up and immediately feel the chill of a cool April dawn spread through my body. I do not want to get out of my warm bed. But I specifically stayed the night near the *mazar*, at the home of a family of the Fellowship who graciously hosted me last minute, so that I could experience the *dhikr* of Bawa at the *mazar*, as I had in Philadelphia and Toronto throughout my fieldwork. Still half asleep, I wash my face with cold water in the bathroom and layer myself with as many clothes as I have and get into my car. I initially intended to walk over to the *mazar*, which would have been less than five minutes away had I cut across the farm, but the pitch black and the open farm country of Coatesville squashed that intention rather quickly. I passed the gates of the *mazar* entrance in my car. I drive slowly through the winding pathway, as rabbits and a deer jump through the wooded area. I park my car and feel my way through the dark by keeping focused on the white domed shrine that lay ahead of me. Once I reach the *mazar's* threshold, I take off my shoes and cover my hair tightly with a pashmina. I quietly open the main doors and walk in gently. Michael Toomey, a senior student of Bawa, is already sitting with his legs crossed at the head of Bawa's tomb. He gives me a kind smile. His wife, Suhaiba, is sitting against the wall and Kelly Hayden, the Secretary of the Fellowship, is sitting at the foot of the tomb, wearing a long black *abaya* (robe) and *kufi* (brimless cap). I sit close to Suhaiba, against the wall facing the tomb, as the others are. Considering that there are only four of us, I was not sure if *dhikr* at the *mazar* followed separation of genders as it did at the *masjid*. No one says anything about my spot selection, so I settle into it. Suhaiba finds the *dhikr* booklet on the



bookshelf and offers it to me. I thank her with a tired nod and smile, but I place the booklet in my lap. At 4:30am Michael Toomey began leading the three of us in *dhikr* at Bawa's tomb in Coatesville, Pennsylvania.

In this section, Chapter 1 provides the backdrop to the Fellowship by situating the unique development of Sufism in North America. Sufism in America is distinct in that it is a culmination of the interest in Persian poetry by American literary masters in the early nineteenth century, which was further solidified with the arrival of Sufi leaders from Muslim nations across the globe to America. This chapter investigates the complexity of the question *what is the Fellowship?* I first provide a spectrum of possibilities that scholars have suggested thus far as answers to what the Fellowship is, but ultimately suggest that these labels and categories of the Fellowship are limiting. Instead of seeking to create more labels, my study aims primarily to explore the processes that result in the diversity that is inherently evident in the Fellowship. Though the Fellowship is internally diverse, I highlight that the Fellowship is currently embedded within two broader currents that challenge the diversity espoused by the Fellowship, (1) Islamophobia and (2) anti-Sufism. It is both the development of Sufism in North America and the current sectarian and political challenges inherent within Islam, which points to the importance of a case study of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship.

Chapter 2 contextualizes the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Headquarters in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I first account for Bawa's own life at the Fellowship in Philadelphia with his disciples to give a pretext to the activities that are noted in the second half of this chapter. The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship contains numerous sub-spaces, such as Bawa's room, the meeting hall, bookstore, publication house and a *masjid* (mosque). Often the *masjid* of the Fellowship draws the most attention both within the community and in the scholarship of the Fellowship but my research indicates that the *masjid* is one facet of the larger complex that is the Fellowship in which various activities take place. Some examples of these activities include the

commemoration of birthdays (*mawlid*s) of the Prophet Muhammad or Abdul Qadir Jilani (d. 1166) and the death anniversary (*urs*) of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen.

Chapter 3 explores the *mazar*, or burial tomb, of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, which I captured in the opening narrative of this section's introduction. I situate the various spaces that form the *mazar* complex. In my analysis of this distinct sacred site, I highlight the diverse approaches to the purpose of the *mazar*, specifically for members of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship and, in recent development, for non-Fellowship members who arrive at its threshold seeking blessings (*baraka*) from a Sufi teacher. The arrival of new Muslim pilgrims to the *mazar* of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen has transformed the Tamil Sufi teacher from Sri Lanka to the Pennsylvania Sufi of America.

## Chapter 1

### Contemporary Sufism and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship in North America

#### Introduction

The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is a community based on the teachings of a Tamil Sufi from Sri Lanka, Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen (d. 1986). This community emerged in the crucible of the counter-cultural era in the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. With a teacher from the East (Sri Lanka) and its initial American contingency, the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship is often sited as a paradigmatic example of a Sufi movement in America. This illustrative capacity of the Fellowship, as an exemplar of Sufism in North America, is important to reflect on here, because beyond the fact that scholars of Sufism in North America cite it readily, what the Fellowship is as discussed by scholars is far from uniform. This lack of consensus invites a necessary intervention in study of this community and further prompts the query, what *actually* is the Fellowship and how is it American, if that? Why is the Fellowship diversely labeled? If it is diversely perceived, then what makes the Fellowship representative of Sufism in North America?

In this chapter I provide the historical context into which Bawa and the Fellowship emerged in North America. Then I situate the varying ways in which the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship has been discussed in scholarly literature, be it as an example of an “American Sufi movement” or as it is differently positioned within typologies and labels created in the scholarship of Sufism in North America. After contextualizing the ways in which the Fellowship is understood in the current literature, I highlight that in many ways the Fellowship is not a *tariqa* (order) in the strictest sense, but Bawa brought traditional ways of being a Sufi and Muslim and he developed it in a new form of Sufi movement in America with transnational roots

in Sri Lanka. The Fellowship may be viewed as an adaptation of these forms of Sufism, which would flourish in the two most porous regions of religions and spiritualities, North America and South Asia. Therefore, though the American landscape readily enabled the ministry of Bawa in acquiring the diversity it did, this does not necessarily entail that the diversity found within the Fellowship is solely born out of its American context. The Fellowship, then, is premised on a practice and discourse of diversity that complemented methods utilized in traditional Sufi orders and Islamic piety, while maintaining universality, which translated into its institutions.

In this chapter, I also highlight external factors that challenge this internal heterogeneity. I contend that these external factors are twofold. The first is that of Islamophobia, especially as it has emerged in America and the second factor is of anti-Sufism, or movements that have developed in opposition to Sufism, within Muslim societies. In accounting for both internal and external factors, it is evident that the act of labeling and categorizing Sufi groups in North America, such as that of the Fellowship, is a double-edged sword. For in acquiring the title of a Sufi-Muslim community, the movement attracts the vitriol of anti-Sufi opponents while simultaneously placing the community on the radar of Islamophobes. Yet avoiding this category all together dissolves the legacy of universalism as one of the many Qu'ranic imperatives, and positions the community in the realm of only universal and American spirituality. The act of labeling and naming the Fellowship as solely Sufi-Muslim or universal Sufi neglects this inherent paradox, yet the discussion alone highlights the crux of this paradox: *Is the Fellowship authentically Sufi and Islamic? Is Sufism authentically Islamic?* The ways in which these questions are answered, both in scholarship and in lived realities amongst its varying stakeholders brings to the foreground one of the central issues in the study of Sufism in North America. This is where the study of the Fellowship and Bawa Muhaiyaddeen provides insight

into how one teacher (Bawa) and his community (Fellowship) live out this paradox, not only because the Fellowship inherently contains diversity, but it also is developing in a climate wherein Islam is either suspiciously viewed as too rigid or Sufism is purged from Islam because it is seen as excessive. In shifting the analysis of the Fellowship to this realm, the negotiations between continuity and ruptures and traditions and transformations are engaged with as being at the heart of Fellowship. This analytical framework of complementary paradoxes within the Fellowship and details of how these unfold in everyday reality, through spaces, rituals, and interpretations, then, can be extended beyond the envisioning of the Fellowship to studies of other Sufi communities in North America.

## **Historical Context of Sufism, Bawa and the Fellowship in North America**

### *Sufism in North America*

Scholars often date the earliest presence of Sufism in North America to the transatlantic slave trade route from parts of Africa to the Americas. Studies, such as by Diouf<sup>15</sup> (reprinted in 2013), have highlighted the “Muslim networks” that existed due to trade between West Africa and the Americas (17).<sup>16</sup> Throughout her research, Diouf documents the early presence of Sufism, especially through ritual uses of talismans and prayer invocations amongst West African slave communities. The presence of any Islamic piety and devotion in this early period was practiced secretly so as not to gain the wrath of slave owners.

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<sup>15</sup> Sylviane A. Diouf has won awards for her historical work on African Diaspora such as the Rosa Parks Award, the Dr. Betty Shabazz Achievement Award and the Pen and Brush Achievement Award. She is the author of *Slavery's Exiles: The Story of American Maroons* (2014) and *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (2013). She is a Curator at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture of the New York Public Library.

<sup>16</sup> These historical mappings capture the lives of early Muslim slaves, such as Ayuba Suleyman Diallo (1701-1773) or Omar ibn Said from Senegal (1770-1863). The research on this topic has grown immensely; for more please consult Albert J. Raboteau's *Slave Religion: the 'Invisible Institution' in the Antebellum South*, 2nd edition (2004) or Richard Brent Turner's *Islam in the African-American Experience* (2003).

If early scatterings of Sufi piety were evident amongst groups of indentured slaves in America starting in the sixteenth century, the element that would add to the complexity of the development of Sufism in North America is the reception of Sufi poetry by influential American literary masters at the height of Transcendentalism, a philosophical and literary movement that emerged in response to intellectual Christianity in places like Harvard Divinity school. Representative of this shift in spirituality is the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson (d. 1882), who gleaned heavily from the Persian poets, especially Sufi ones. This moment of encountering Sufi poets, such as Hafiz (d. 1389/1390) or Saadi (d. 1291/1292) of Shiraz,<sup>17</sup> in America resulted because of the exchanges of Europeans with the “Orient.” Seminal to this process of interchange were works such as by Sir William Jones (d. 1794), who held a governmental post in Bengal and Calcutta (1783-1794). Letters written by Jones as early as 1768 indicate that it was the Hungarian-born diplomat Charles Reviczky (d. 1793) who introduced Hafiz to Jones, leading to a life long interest in Persian poetry.<sup>18</sup> Jones regularly discussed these traditions in *Asiatic Researches and Asiatic Miscellany* of his encounters of cultures of the East, especially of religions, peoples and poetic traditions (Aminrazavi 2014, 3).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Shams al-Din Muhammad Hafiz (d. 1389), also known as al-Shirazi, is known as the greatest Persian poet and a master of the *ghazal* (a lyric poetry), which emphasized love and seeking the divine. Musicians often use his poetry and his tomb attracts varying pilgrims. Saadi Shirazi (d. 1291 or 1292) was born in Shiraz, Iran, and is known as a great classical poet. He was also displaced by the Mongol invasions, which led to his wide travels throughout, though he would return to Shiraz, where he was entombed. It is Saadi’s words that grace the Hall of Nations in New York, which captures his universalist understanding of Islam, especially as it was transmitted to the west: “Of one Essence is the human race, Thusly has Creation put the Base; One Limb impacted is sufficient, For all Others to feel the Mace.”

<sup>18</sup> For more on these letters please see *The Letters of Sir William Jones* (1970) Edited by Garland Cannon Volume I and II (Oxford at the Clarendon Press and Oxford University Press, Ely House London).

<sup>19</sup> Jones’ “A Persian Song” was inspired by Hafiz’s poetry which would then appear in journals such as *the Annual Register*, *Gentleman’s Magazine*, *Monthly Review* and *Town and Country* from 1772-1786 (Aminrazavi 2014, 3). Jones is only one such illustration of this process of cultural, literary and spiritual exchange that unfolded during this period, especially as a result of the need to “represent the Orient at the turn of the nineteenth century” (Aminrazavi 2013, 4). Of course, other religious traditions were also extrapolated during this time, these included Hinduism and its sacred canons such as the *Bhagavad Gita* or Buddhism.

This interest was set forth not only because of the colonial dynamics of the Orientalists and their need to gain power over regions which they were administrating, but also because movements such as Romanticism emerged after the Industrial Revolution in Europe and turned inward, emphasizing *emotion* as central to human experience and spirituality. One of the influences for the English Romantic poets was the tradition of Platonic and Neoplatonic thought. Scholars, such as Leonard Lewisohn,<sup>20</sup> note, “Plato’s thought and Neoplatonism are the most important part of the mutual philosophical heritage shared by these Christian Romantic and Muslim Persian Sufi poets and mystics” (2014, 17). The encounter of Sufi poetry as a means to experience the “Orient” and “Eastern Wisdom” unfolded amongst German and British Romantic movements, which would then be influential in the development of American Transcendentalism (Einboden 2014).

Ralph Waldo Emerson (d. 1882) stands at the heart of the Transcendentalist movement. This essayist, poet and lecturer would quote Sir William Jones readily in his own works. He also read *Arabian Nights* and Platonic, Neoplatonic and Zoroastrian traditions, which he evoked in his writings. During this time his own interest in Persian poetic traditions grew and led to his introduction of Persian poetry through the translations by German Romantic poets (Ekhtiyar 2014, 58-59). His interest in these texts were a means to engage with critical and personal issues at the heart of the Transcendentalist movement, which was a response to the intellectual and theological outlook of the Unitarian Church. Emerson was seeking spirituality as experientially and internally oriented, but also as reflected in nature. Persian poetry, often by Sufis, were

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<sup>20</sup> Leonard Lewisohn is a Senior Lecturer and an Iran Heritage Foundation Fellow in Persian and Sufi Literature at the University of Exeter, in the United Kingdom. He has written extensively on classical Persian Poetry and Sufism. Currently he is working on editing the *Mawlana Rumi Review*, an academic journal and is preparing a publication entitled *The Philosophy of Ecstasy: Rumi and the Sufi Tradition*.



decorated with themes of free will, fate, love, nature and beauty, especially as it manifested immanently, and thus captured the imagination of Transcendentalists, such as Emerson.<sup>21</sup> Translations of Persian poetry by Emerson include those of Hafiz, but also others such as Saadi, Omar Khayyam<sup>22</sup> and Attar (d. 1220)<sup>23</sup> (Yohannan 1943, 2014). Emerson's own works would go on to influence a new generation of American literary masters, such as the poets Walt Whitman (d. 1892) and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (d. 1882) and the novelist Herman Melville (d. 1891) and many more, in what is often called the period of "American Renaissance."<sup>24</sup>

Early Orientalists found Persian poetic traditions of love intoxication and the mystique of the whirling dervishes as incompatible with the legalistic tradition of the Qur'an, as they understood it. Colonialists and scholars explained that it was likely that Sufism (or the "Soofees") developed out of "Syrian-Christian monasticism, Greek neo-Platonism, Zoroastrianism, and Indian religious traditions" (Geaves 2015, 235; Ernst 1997). They contended that Sufism did not have genesis in Islam by any means. The latter perception of Sufism would set in motion a particular current of Sufism in North America as other than Islam, which also interacted with other American spiritualities that were brewing. This period in Europe and America in which Persian poetic traditions were circulating served as the fertile landscape in

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<sup>21</sup> John D. Yohannan in his early study provides a working list of "translations" by Emerson of various Persian mystics he read in translation, especially as he gleaned from the works of Joseph von Hammer's German translations beginning in the 1840s (1943). These published works of Emerson's poetry mainly include those that are four or more lines, with a few exceptions such as the 176-line work entitled "Saadi" for the journal *The Dial* (Ekhtiyar 2014, 59). His submissions to journals include *The Liberty Bell by Friends of Freedom* (Boston, 1851) and *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston, 1912) (Yohannan, 1943, 417-420).

<sup>22</sup> Abu'l Fath 'Umar ibn Ibrahim Khayyam (d. cira. 1124-1129) was born in Nishapur. He studied with many local Sufi saints. Khayyam was influenced by Ibn Sina's philosophy and is known popularly for the *Rubaiyat* or *Quatrains*, though he did contribute to philosophy, mathematics and science. Khayyam became popular in the west because of his "translations" by the poet Edward FitzGerald (d. 1883).

<sup>23</sup> The Persian mystic poet Fariduddin Attar of Nishapur (d.1220) was a pharmacist, but he is known for his hagiographies of Sufi saints and his seminal flight narrative of *The Conference of the Birds*.

<sup>24</sup> For more on this please see *Sufism and American Literary Masters* (2014) edited by Mehdi Aminrazavi.

which masters who travelled to America would plant the seeds of Sufism through their living charismatic presence.

### *Hazrat Inayat Khan and the Spread of Sufism in the Twentieth Century*

Hazrat Inayat Khan (d. 1927) remains the first teacher from the “East” to attempt to spread Sufism in America. He arrived in New York in 1910 via Bombay on a ship with his cousin and brothers in a musical trope. As a child, he was sent to a Hindu school, learned English and was initiated in the Chishti tradition of India.<sup>25</sup> His Shaykh Khawaja Abu Hisham Madani summoned Khan to go to the West to join the East and West through music and spirituality, forming the basis of his arrival to America. Hazrat Inayat Khan’s worldview and cosmology were inclusive of all manifestations of the one divine and so was compatible with the spiritual exchanges that were unfolding in the metaphysical milieu of America in this period.<sup>26</sup> This is seen in how he presented Sufism: “If anyone asks what Sufism is, what kind of religion it is, the answer is that

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<sup>25</sup> The Chishti lineage of Sufism is found especially in South Asia and Afghanistan. It is traced to the Sufi teacher Moinuddin Chishti (d. 1230), to Lahore and then to Ajmer, where he is buried. The tradition has spread across the globe now, however it is known in the South Asian region through its many sub-branches. This particular order of Sufism emphasizes the practice of listening to Qawwali or musical recitation. For more please see Carl Ernst and Bruce Lawrence’s *Sufi Martyrs of Love: Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond* (2002) and Robert Rozeenal’s *Islamic Sufism Unbound: Politics and Piety in the Twenty-First Century Pakistan* (2007).

<sup>26</sup> The early 1900s was an immensely important period in America for spiritual curiosity, especially towards “oriental wisdom.” Catherine Albanese in her *A Republic of Mind and Spirit* (2007) maps the trajectory of “metaphysical” religions in America. She explores the Theosophical philosophies that were becoming systematized by Madame Helena Petrovna Blavastky (d. 1891) and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (d. 1907) who formed the Theosophical Society of New York City in 1875. Albanese understands the latter as the culmination of America’s fascination with “metaphysical” and “magical” Christian tendencies that can be dated back to the Renaissance philosophies of Hermeticism, Neoplatonism and Humanism. Metaphysical traditions emerging during this porous period would include the Freemasons, Swedenborgianism and Spiritualists movements. Sufism was circulating as part of these circuits of “Oriental wisdom” that many sought out in the East and elements of which would be adopted into new American spiritual movements. In the process, it was readily amalgamated with esoteric traditions extracted from Hinduism and Buddhism while adapting to a Christian American landscape.

Sufism is the religion of the heart, the religion in which the [...] primary importance is to seek God in the heart of mankind” (quoted in Khan 2001, 260).<sup>27</sup>

Hazrat Inayat Khan would go on to form the Sufi Order, which was named the Sufi Movement, by giving public talks to interested students he met during his musical concerts. His time in America would be short lived however. From the moment of his arrival, he found the experience of racial discrimination to be too adverse, along with people’s negative perception of Islam, which likely further propelled his universal approaches to Sufism. Before leaving America to travel to Europe Hazrat Inayat Khan initiated a *murshida* (female disciple) by the name of Ada Martin, who adopted the name Rabia. Rabia established the seminal Kaaba Allah in Fairfax, California, which became the headquarters of the Sufi Message in America.<sup>28</sup> Prior to his departure from America, Khan also married an American woman by the name of Ora Ameena Ray Baker (d. 1949). It was the children from this marriage that helped lead Hazrat Inayat Khan’s movement into the current era, of which Zia Inayat Khan<sup>29</sup> is the current successor. Zia Inayat Khan, the grandson of Hazrat Inayat Khan, is presently the leader of the Sufi Order International in New Lebanon, New York State. Even after Hazrat Inayat Khan left for Europe to

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<sup>27</sup> Hazrat Inayat Khan has achieved prominence in New Delhi, where his *dargah* remains, among the Nizami-Chishti Sufis. Scholars such as Lawrence and Ernst in their *Sufi Martyrs of Love* (2002) suggest that Khan was in fact a Sufi authority due to his initiation and practice of South Asian Sufism of the Chishtis, though they question the “authentic” identity of his eclectic followers, especially those who are not Muslim. His successor and grandson Pir Zia Inayat Khan argues that Khan’s own Sufism and Islam formed his philosophy, teaching and mysticism, especially as it manifested in South Asia amongst the Chishtis. For more see please see Zia Inayat-Khan’s doctoral dissertation *A Hybrid Sufi Order at the Crossroads of Modernity: the Sufi Order and Sufi Movement of Pir-O-Murshid Inayat Khan* (2006).

<sup>28</sup> For more on this community please see Celia Genn’s study. Genn explores the Inayati Movement (Hazrat Inayat Khan’s movement) not as a Sufi tradition but within the sociological lens of “Asian-derived” New Religious Movement by studying the institutionalization of the community and of how non-Muslim followers propelled Khan’s philosophy of “universalism” to be forefront of the Inayati Movement, which for Genn was the reason for its ultimate success (Genn 2007, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Pir Zia Inayat Khan was born to Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan and Taj Begum Inayat in 1971 in Novato, California. He completed his PhD in Religion at Duke University with the supervision of Carl Ernst, Omid Safi and Bruce Lawrence. Prior to this he studied Persian and Urdu at the London School of Oriental and African Studies. He is the current teacher and head of the Sufi Order International of his grandfather (Hazrat Inayat Khan) and is the founder of Suluk Academy, which teaches contemplative study and has branches in United States and Europe.

continue his mission, his Sufi Order would remain the only Sufi community in America until the mid-twentieth century.<sup>30</sup>

Khan's representation of Sufism beyond Islam, through music and poetry was based on his South Asian Chishti tradition. This spiritual training and background in South Asia along with the ways in which interested disciples already experienced Sufism set the path for how Khan would introduce and teach Sufism in America. Still, the arrival of Hazrat Inayat Khan in America marks the first known instance of a Sufi leader who arrived with the purpose of spreading Sufism in America, through his role as a living teacher. It is this form of transmission of Sufism that would continue to unfold in the twentieth century, especially in the 1960s.

The 1960s was a period of anti-establishmentarianism and anti-institutionalism, wherein movements such as African-American Civil Rights and feminism were at their peak. Many movements were also motivated by disagreement of the United States government's involvement in the Vietnam War. As such, the baby boom generation, or those who were born in the aftermath of World War II, was coming of age in an era of cultural, social, religious and political questioning. Many broke free from Christian and Jewish establishments, forming the "generation of seekers." These seekers gravitated toward spiritual and esoteric traditions of Buddhism,

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<sup>30</sup> Karin Jironet explains in her study of *The Life, Times and Leadership of Hazrat Inayat Khan Brothers 1927-1967* (2009) that it was in Europe that Khan spent most of his mission to the West. Geneva would be the headquarters of the Sufi Movement in 1923. Upon his unexpected death during a visit to New Delhi, India in 1927 at the age of 44, his movement split over issues of leadership, resulting in his American and European communities developing separately. In Geneva, the center of his European community, his brothers would take over the role of *pir-o-murshid*, while in America Rabia led the way. Rabia eventually met the Indian mystic Meher Baba (d. 1969) to whom the leadership of the Sufi Order was passed on to. This decision created further schisms within the movement, such as the leaving of Samuel L. Lewis, or Sufi Sam (d. 1971), as he was popularly known. Lewis left the order during this time because of the selection of Meher Baba. Sufi Sam had traveled and studied with teachers from Southeast Asia to South Asia and Egypt. He returned to America in 1960 and led a movement known as the Dances of Universal Peace. In Europe institutional challenges were also prominent within Khan's movement where his brothers took the fold but Vilayat Khan, Hazrat Inayat Khan's son, began to give public talks again starting from 1955 which led to the "endorsement" of himself as the head of the Sufi Order over his uncle Muhammad Ali Khan (Dickson 2012, 85-86).

Hinduism, Sikhism and Sufism as they manifested in the North American context. New groups and at times “cults” also formed or reformed creating a series of New Religious Movements (NRM) (Heelas 1996; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Heelas 2009; Dawson 2003).

It is in this time period and the years that followed that the presence of Sufism, especially in relation to Islam, continued to grow, as a result of the relaxing of immigration laws after 1965 in the United States. These changes in immigration policies led to the increase of immigrant communities from non-European countries, such as those from predominantly Muslim lands. This period saw the arrival of more Sufi teachers from the east, such as Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen (d. 1986) from Sri Lanka, Suleyman Dede (d. 1985)<sup>31</sup> and Muzaffer Ozak (d. 1985)<sup>32</sup> from Turkey and Frithjof Schuon (d. 1998)<sup>33</sup> from Europe to name just a few. Each

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<sup>31</sup> Suleyman Dede, born in Konya, Turkey in 1904 was a *shaykh* of the Mevlevi Order. Dede came to America in 1976 at the request of a student and stayed at the Institute for Conscious Life in Los Angeles (Dickson 2012, 110). During this visit, Dede taught the practice of the Mevlevi and his visit resulted in the formation of two branches of the Mevleviyya in North America. Dede’s son Jelaeddin Loras leads the Mevlevi Order of America. The Threshold Society is led by Dede’s students Kabir and Camille Helminski (Dickson 2012, 111). Loras currently lives in Hawaii where he maintains the leadership of the Mevlevi Order of America, while the Threshold Society is based in Louisville, Kentucky. The Threshold Society has twelve branches in six different countries, including Canada. This society is also known for its numerous publications of Rumi and his teachings.

<sup>32</sup> Muzaffer Ozak arrived in America in 1978 and held the first Halveti-Jerrahi *dhikr* in New York University in Manhattan (Dickson 2012, 115). Tosun Bayrak, from Turkey, an artist in New York, met Ozak in Istanbul and became one of his followers. During Ozak’s first visit, he also appeared on Lex Hixon’s radio program called *In the Spirit*. Hixon eventually became a disciple of Ozak and went on to become one of *khalifas* or representatives, which also included Gul Ali Gordon and Fariha Friedrich al-Jerrahi (Dickson 2012, 120-121). Ozak’s visits to America resulted in the development of two Halveti-Jerrahi orders in America, the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Order and the Halveti-Jerrahi Order of Dervishes (Dickson 2012, 115). Tosun Bayrak purchased a property in Chestnut Ridge in New York where a mosque was established called the masjid al-Farah (mosque of joy/ease) (Dickson 2012, 120). With Ozak’s death in 1985, however, there were differences of opinions amongst his students. Tosun Bayrak, in Spring Valley, New York continued a “more traditional Turkish, Muslim approach” under the patronage of Ozak’s successor in Istanbul, Safer Effendi (Dickson 2012, 121).

<sup>33</sup> Frithjof Schuon (d. 1998), also known as *shaykh* ‘Isa Nur al-Din, was a Swiss author and Sufi teacher, who built upon the French Philosopher René Guénon’s thoughts on Traditionalism (Dickson 2012, 124). He wrote on many different religious traditions highlighting the philosophy of perennial wisdom (*Sophia Perennis*) “at the heart of human religious history” (Dickson 2012, 125). Schuon established the branch of the Shadhili-Alawiyya. In his teachings he emphasized *dhikr* more than other Islamic practices, and often orientated his understanding of Sufism from Advaita Vedanta (Dickson 2012, 126). This led to the different approaches between Guénon and Schuon; the former emphasized “tradition” while the latter stressed universalism. Schuon was eventually also initiated into the Sioux tribe, as his interest in Native American spirituality grew (Dickson 2012, 128). In 1965, a mystical vision of the Virgin Mary also altered the course of the Alawiyya branch and led to the renaming of the group as the Maryamiyya (Dickson 2012, 128; see Sedgwick 2004). Due to his connections with Victor Danner, a Professor of

of these teachers, through their roles as living *shayhs* transmitted their own intended Sufi orders and/or movements, as regionally defined and individually adapted it to their new American audience.

Currently the context in which one is encountering Sufism in North America is then a product of these historical waves of encounters with Sufism. It has been influenced by the legacies of American literary masters who were inspired by Persian poetic traditions. This poetic interest in Sufism and its subsequent utilization led to the larger mixing of American metaphysical traditions. It meant that Sufism was situated outside the context of Islam. Where the literary tradition of Sufism in America was appreciated for its poetic prowess and its answers to metaphysical questions that many of its readers sought, it is the presence of a living Sufi teacher that played the most critical role in defining, sustaining and solidifying Sufism in America. Historically in regions across the globe, be it South Asia, Southeast Asia or North Africa, Sufi teachers and wandering ascetics spread Sufism locally, adapting their teachings of Islam and Sufism to the cultural and religious climates of their new students. This is not any different in how Sufism came to proliferate and continues to do so in America. Each Sufi teacher determined the outcome of the thread of Sufism she/he taught and the practices and rituals

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Religious Studies in Bloomington, Indiana, the Maryamiyya center was established in Bloomington in 1967. Schuon moved to Indiana in 1981. At present, the scholar of Islamic Studies at George Washington University, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, leads the movement. Nasr, originally from Tehran, Iran was exiled due to his close ties to the imperial court of Shah Pahlavi during the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Nasr encountered Traditionalism through the writings of Schuon during his studies at MIT and would meet him in 1957. With the passing of Schuon in 1998, Nasr became the head of the Maryamiyya and has “re-asserted the order’s Islamic nature and emphasized Schuon’s role as a traditional Muslim Sufi *shaykh*” (Dickson 2012, 132). Some of Schuon’s students still feel that Schuon was a “‘primordial’ sage who taught a pure esotericism ultimately beyond any single tradition. For them, Islam is not central to his teachings, but merely functions as a particularly useful support for esoteric knowledge” (Dickson 2012, 133).

adopted were dependent on the leader's authority. As such, some Sufi teachers presented Sufism within the confines of Islam, whereas others did not.<sup>34</sup>

Sufi communities based on leaders who emerged from the 1970s and onwards have now institutionalized in America. Their students have taken up leadership roles or their communities have expanded across North America. In doing so they have undergone different processes of institutionalization. Sufi communities are contending with issues that "include how to remember the founding story; the transmission of major teachings during the life and death of the founder; defining communal identity with the larger landscape; and continued leadership, interpretation and relations with other communities in changing contexts" (Webb 2013, 197). This institutional process unfolds as interest in Sufism continues to grow because of popular literary and cultural reproductions of Sufi poets, especially of Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273),<sup>35</sup> while Muslim immigrants continue to join existing orders or start their own Sufi communities. It is in this context that one is encountering the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship.

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<sup>34</sup> For an excellent analysis of some contemporary Sufi teachers in America and their understanding and representation of Sufism please see *Living Sufism in North America between Tradition and Transformation* (2015) by William Rory Dickson. Dickson is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Islamic Religion and Culture at the University of Winnipeg. Dickson has published articles in the *Journal of Contemporary Islam and Studies in Religion*. His research focuses both on lived Islam in North American contexts and on mystical elements of the Islamic intellectual tradition.

<sup>35</sup> Born in the city of Balk (in present day Tajikistan), just before the beginning of the Mongol invasion, Rumi was a teacher of religious sciences. It was his meeting of Shams-i Tabrizi, who would transform Rumi's life spiritually. His relationship with Shams resulted in criticism from those within his family and the larger society. With the disappearance of Shams, Rumi channeled his loss and separation into poetry and music, which formed a following into what is known as the Mevlevi Order of Dervishes in Konya. Rumi's poetry would become one of the best sellers in the west, leading to what has become known as at the "Rumi-phenomenon." This is most notable in the varying translations, illustrations and novels on Rumi's life and poetry that one can find in most bookstores across America (Dunn, Mascetti et al 2000; Barks and Green 1997; Shafak 2011).

## **Scholarship on the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship**

### *An Example of an American Sufi Movement*

Scholarship on Sufism in North America has contended with particularities of Sufism through the creation of typologies in which different scholars intriguingly place the Fellowship in varying slots. It is worthwhile to reflect on these different approaches to the Fellowship, as it explains why this community is an illustrative case study for understanding Sufism, in all its manifestations in North America. For scholars like Omid Safi,<sup>36</sup> Bawa and the Fellowship is an example of one of the currents of Islam in America; one that no longer needs to be sought out in Muslim lands far away, but rooted in the soil of America. He expressed this in an online article entitled “Why Bawa and the Fellowship?”

Over time, I have come to see that the legacy of Bawa (and his children, such as Dr. G. [a disciple]) also applies to the history of Islam in America. There is the temptation to keep running here and there, to tap into the “wells” that exist in Muslim-majority countries. That is an understandable endeavor, and very noble. I understand the desire of Muslims to want to go to Egypt, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Morocco, Mauritania, and other Muslim contexts to gain spiritual wisdom. At the same time, it is also important for us to dig deep, dig deeper right here in America, till we hit the water of life here. The legacy of Bawa is a part of that. The legacy of African-American Islam is a part of that. The legacy of transnational Muslims and

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<sup>36</sup> Safi is a Professor of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at Duke University, and he is also the Director of the Duke Islamic Studies Center. Safi focuses on Islamic mysticism, contemporary Islamic thought and medieval Islamic history. Safi was a leader of the progressive Muslim movement, as expressed in his edited volume *Progressive Muslims* (2003). He was a co-founder of the Progressive Muslim Union, which he stepped aside from and is now also defunct.



white converts is a part of that. What matters is to dig deep enough to find the water of life, here in America.<sup>37</sup>

Safi's comments point to Bawa and the Fellowship as an integral part of what "spiritual wisdom" in America is; a wisdom that is at the heart of being Muslim in America. Bawa and the Fellowship's legacy is not the only facet, as it sits on a spectrum of American Islam that includes "African-American Islam", "transnational" Islam and "white converts" to Islam. In Safi's comments, then, the emphasis is on the deep rootedness of the Fellowship in American Muslim history. This is in keeping with other scholars who have included Bawa, the Fellowship, but more importantly its spaces as central to a distinctive American Muslim history. For instance, Kambiz GhaneaBassiri<sup>38</sup> situates the Fellowship's emergence to "a number of immigrant Muslims in the 1970s and 1980s [who] also established Sufi communities", of which the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship is one such example (300). GhaneaBassiri's brief mention of the Fellowship highlights specifically the *mazar* as an important Muslim space in America, one which has allowed for the re-creation of the practice of performing pilgrimage to a Sufi saint's tomb in America (2012, 301).<sup>39</sup>

Frank Korom's<sup>40</sup> recent study of Bawa and the Fellowship articulates the Fellowship in a distinct framework. In his "Speaking with Sufis: Dialogue with Whom and about What?" (2012), though mapping the development of the Fellowship and Bawa from Sri Lanka into America,

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<sup>37</sup> "Why Bawa and the Fellowship?" in *Religion News Service* <http://omidsafi.religionnews.com/2014/03/22/american-islam-and-bawa-muhaiyaddeen/#sthash.wjDX1fol.dpuf> (Accessed March 16, 2015).

<sup>38</sup> Kambiz GhaneaBassiri is an Associate Professor of Religion and Humanities with specialization in Islam at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. His area of study is on Islamic social and intellectual history in the classical and modern periods, Islam in America, material dimensions of religions and religious diversity in US history.

<sup>39</sup> This specific significance is the topic of Chapter 3.

<sup>40</sup> Frank Korom is Professor of Religion and Anthropology at Boston University. His research areas include South Asian religious traditions, especially contemporary religions to diaspora and transnational movements. He has conducted work on East Indians in the Caribbean and the global community of Tibetan refugees.

Korom asks the readers to “move away from the emic, or insider point of view, to analyze objectively how a marginal ‘cult’ evolves into a ‘sect’ then ultimately a ‘denomination’ as it temporally ages and doctrinally matures” (241). He goes on to conclude:

Bawa was highly skilled at contextualizing and adapting his teachings to his immediate surroundings. To succeed in the United States, he created a form of what we might tentatively call “protestant Islam” which emphasized similarity in difference by borrowing Christian social structures and congregational practices while simultaneously developing a linguistic discourse of distinctness (Korom 2012, 248).

With Bawa’s death, Korom asserts the Fellowship “matured” in a “process of Islamization” which involved “purification” leading to a “hybridity” but it also underwent “Islamization [...] over the last quarter of a century [...]resulting] in the establishment of a distinctly American form of Islamic practice based on civility, democracy and transparency” (2012, 248). Korom, like Safi and GhaneaBassiri, situates the Fellowship within the context of America, but in his case he does so by pointing to the *Americanness* (Christian-ness) of the Fellowship. He does this based on his understanding of the Fellowship’s religious outlooks that are married to supposedly quintessential American principles of “civility, democracy and transparency” (2012, 248). Further, Korom represents the Fellowship as going through a process of “Islamization” and “purification” leading to the possibility of its “hybridity” but one that still sits at the heart of American religiosity. Be it an example of American Islam, as pointed to by Safi and GhaneaBassiri or Americanness because of its institutionalization process and adaptation and inherited principles, as situated by Korom, immediately one is beginning to note the differing

lenses through which the Fellowship is viewed. Other frameworks of the Fellowship have been based on categories of Sufism and its relationship to Islam, which has also placed it in the realm of a New Religious Movement.

### *Typologies and Labels of Bawa and the Fellowship*

Julianne Hazen<sup>41</sup> points out in her doctoral dissertation that the literature on Sufism in the America can be oriented towards four types of categories that are used to define and label Sufi communities generally. Often these labels are dependent on the community's (1) orientations to Islam, (2) ethnic composition, (3) acculturation to Western society and (4) organizational components (2011, 77). Each of these orientations and their relationships with each other then is interpreted by scholars interested in Sufism in North America to assess Sufi communities either as an Islamic movement or a non-Islamic one. It is in this manner that Marcia Hermansen<sup>42</sup> put forth the horticulturally based typology in her early studies of Sufism in North America (1997). Her typology for defining Sufi communities in North America is three-fold. The first was that of a "transplant" which represented Sufi communities that originated elsewhere (i.e., the country of the Sufi teacher's origins) and was "transplanted" (or migrated) to the American context. The second was a "perennial" group, which was premised on universal approaches to Sufism, which often did not include the keeping of Islamic rituals and practices. Finally, the last category was a

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<sup>41</sup> Julianne Hazen is the founding director of the Office of Sufi Studies at the World Life Institute, Medina, New York. She also is an Adjunct Professor of Islam and the West at Niagara University and a Visiting Researcher at Georgetown University's Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding. She works on Sufism in North America. Her doctoral dissertation was on the Alami *tariqa* of Waterport, New York. Hazen's study, which was both quantitative and qualitative, included thirty-eight *murids*, of whom most were locally based near Waterport, but also included Canadians, such as those from Toronto, Canada.

<sup>42</sup> Marcia Hermansen is the Director of the Islamic World Studies Program and Professor in the Theology Department at Loyola University in Chicago. She teaches courses on Islam and religious studies. Her areas of research include Islamic thought, Sufism, Islam and Muslims in South Asia, Muslims in America and women in Islam.

“hybrid” community, which contained varying elements of both previous categories. For Hermansen, the Fellowship was an example of a “hybrid” Sufi community (1997), in that it was a community that contained both “perennial” and universal approaches to Sufism, while also being an example of a “transplant” movement that attracted members from Muslim immigrant backgrounds.

In Hermansen’s more recent chapter contribution to *South Asian Sufis* (2012) she presents a further model with three groupings for South Asian Sufi movements in America and Canada. These include Sufi groups with universalistic outlook (i.e., the movement of Hazrat Inayat Khan), those with “grounding in Islamic sharia” (in which category she places the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship) and finally transplants, which are mainly immigrant Sufi communities from Muslim societies (2012, 247). In these categories she also discusses groups that are “post-tariqa” or “quasi-tariqa” such as the Indian Deobandi movement<sup>43</sup> or those affiliated with Barelvism of Maulana Reza Khan<sup>44</sup> (d. 1921) (2012, 248). In drawing attention to specific South Asian manifestations of Sufism in America, Hermansen highlights how localized and cultural Sufi groups, through South Asian teachers and transplanted branches of transnational communities, have diversified Sufism in North America. Importantly though, in

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<sup>43</sup> *Madrasas* or Islamic learning centres developed in Deoband, in northern India in 1867 formed after the Indian Mutiny of 1857 as a response to colonial presence in India. The aim of the *madrasas* in Deoband was to “preserve and propagate the teachings of Islam in this new political climate” and the new system of teaching became popular throughout towns and villages in India (Tayob 2009, 273). Though early Deoband scholars and students were affiliated with Sufi philosophies as well as legal and theological training. The movement formed in the mid-nineteenth century with the aim to spread religious teachings through the use of British school systems. Though originally not politically involved, it did so with the leadership of Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi (1872-1944), especially during the partition of India and Pakistan. Some branches of Deobandi, especially in regions of Afghanistan have gained attain due to support of movements like al-Qaeda. For more please see Barbara Metcalfe in her study *Islamic Revival in British India: Deobandi, 1860-1900* (2002).

<sup>44</sup> Seen as opponents of the Deobandi movement, the Barelvi *ulama* were led by Maulana Ahmad Reza Khan (d. 1921) of Bareilly in the early twentieth century. Where the Deobandi attempted to get rid of shrine visitation and veneration to the prophet, Barelvi saw this as the basis of Islam in India. For more please see Usha Sanyal's *Devotional Islam and Politics: Ahmad Riza Khan Bareilly and His Movement, 1870-1920* (1996).

Hermansen's own scholarship the labels acquired by the Fellowship have included a "hybrid" Sufi group to that of a South Asian Sufi community based in "Islamic sharia".

Alan Godlas<sup>45</sup> develops a similar strategy in his study. He presents Sufi groups as Islamic Sufi Orders (i.e., Shadhiliyya), Quasi-Islamic (the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship), non-Islamic organizations (Sufi Sam and the Islamia Ruhaniat Society) and finally organizations or schools that disseminate knowledge about Sufism, as opposed to functioning as a *tariqa* or a Sufi order proper.<sup>46</sup> The placement of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship in the category of "Quasi-Islamic" needs to be problematized, as this category specifically points to a subtle (or explicit) tendency to categorize Sufi communities in North America in relation to *authenticity*. These categories themselves seem to be invested in ascribing "orthodoxy" in relation to Islam as a means to assess the authenticity of Sufism, especially in North America. It also suggests that *Sufism* is a reified entity that has remained static. Similar criticisms have been given to approaches utilized by Oluf Schönbeck<sup>47</sup> (2009), who employs terms such as "creolization", "hybridization" and "syncretization" to speak about Sufism in North America. Scholars have critiqued the latter theoretical frameworks, as it implies that there was indeed a *pure Sufism* to begin with (Ernst 2005). If on the one hand, the Fellowship is accepted as a Sufi community, though the kind of Sufi community it is perceived as varies, then on the other hand it is often positioned as a community that is either a New Religious Movement or an alternative form of Islamic spirituality altogether.

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<sup>45</sup> Alan Godlass is an Associate Professor in the Department of Religion at the University of Georgia. He is also the director of the UGA Virtual Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of the Islamic World and co-director of the UGA Arabic major and UGA Morocco Maymester program. He writes and teaches in the area of Islamic and Arabic Studies, with focus on Sufism.

<sup>46</sup> Alan Godless, "Sufism, the West, and Modernity" <http://islam.uga.edu/sufismwest.html> (Accessed May 4, 2015).

<sup>47</sup> Schönbeck is a Research Fellow at the Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, at the University of Copenhagen. He also received his PhD here in history of religions in 2001. His area of research includes contemporary Sufism and devotional rituals. He is presently researching the Lutheran mission in South India.

Mohamed Mauroof was a Muslim who knew Bawa in Sri Lanka, prior to his arrival in the United States to complete his doctoral studies. His doctoral dissertation, which he completed in the Anthropology Department at the University of Pennsylvania, was on Bawa Muhaiyaddeen and the early years of the Fellowship, and is entitled *The Culture and Experience of Luminous and Liminal Komunesam* (1976).<sup>48</sup> In his dissertation, he presents the Fellowship as a “religious movement” with a “prophet” (Bawa), but not in the way it is used in Arabic (i.e., *Nabi* or *Rasul*) but in the “Indic *devas* and *dayvar*” or as a holy figure (Mauroof 1976, 1). Mauroof situates Bawa as the prophet of the “revitalization movement” known as *komunesam*. “Komu” is borrowed from a discourse in which Bawa discusses communism (*comu* and thus community) and *nesam* a Tamil word for “affection” creating the English-Tamil word for a community that provides affection or “compassion.”<sup>49</sup> He dedicates an entire chapter to the review of “revitalization movements” based on Anthony F. C Wallace’s (1956) theory of revitalization movements, which is “any conscious, organized effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture” (quoted in Mauroof 1976, 167). According to Mauroof’s understanding, the Fellowship, at least in its first “fifteen months” of his fieldwork, was a religious community based on the compassion teachings of their prophet Bawa, but also a “fast-growing cult in contemporary North America” (Mauroof 1976, 7).

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<sup>48</sup> His study is valuable because he not only provides personal insight of his relationship with Bawa, that formed in Sri Lanka and culminated in America, but his fieldwork period for his dissertation is between Bawa’s first arrival to America and his return to Sri Lanka in November 1972. His affinity to the community he was studying and the writing of the dissertation in the mid-1970s also results in shifts in how he articulates a community that is forming before him. He explains this when he writes that he viewed his relationship to his study from two points “(1) Mauroof as a central figure and participant (2) Mauroof as a removed analyst of the movement and of what it meant to those who participated in it” (Mauroof 1976, 11).

<sup>49</sup> This is based on a discourse given by Bawa; I quote part of it as found in Mauroof’s study. Bawa says, “There is communism, and then there is *komu-nesam*, which loves everybody. Jesus was a love-everybody person; I am also like that. All the messengers were *komu-nesam*. Communism is different. It is the result of hunger, the problem of hunger. They have two different meanings” (quoted in Mauroof 1976, 101).

Benjamin Snyder<sup>50</sup> in his masters' thesis on the Fellowship articulates that it is a "deeply spiritual space" and a "spiritual community" (2003, 7). He goes on to write further:

[...] I define the Fellowship as a spiritual community. The word spiritual seems to include the values and practices of inner change that are of a religious nature but excludes the idea of dogmatism and traditional religious Law that we often associate with the term religion. Spiritual connotes the internal work that *a* religious life offers, the feeling of divinity, without emphasis on adherence to external requirements for leading *the* religious life, the feeling of bounded-ness (2003, 11-12).

Both Mauroof and Snyder, who have a relationship to the Fellowship and to Bawa, articulate the Fellowship not in Islamic terms but as communities for those interested in spirituality.

In the *Encyclopedia of New Religions: New Religious Movements, Sects and Alternative Spiritualities* (2004), edited by Christopher Patridge, the Bawa Muhaiyadeen Fellowship is used to illustrate alternative spiritualities in Islam. Its placement in this anthology (as the title suggests) proposes its "newness" or "alternativity." The Fellowship is still labeled as a Sufi community, but it is placed in a compendium that seeks to explore "new religions." Ron Geaves,<sup>51</sup> who discusses the Fellowship briefly, writes:

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<sup>50</sup> Snyder completed his masters' thesis in the anthropology department at Bryn Mawr College, though he does not explicitly state his relationship to the Fellowship community in his thesis, it is appears that he is a member of the community.

<sup>51</sup> Geaves is a Professor of Comparative Study of Religion at Liverpool Hope University and Director of the Centre for the Applied Study of Muslims and Islam in Britain. He is also the current President of the Muslims in Britain Research Network. He is the author of several books on Muslims in the West, especially Britain, including *Sufis of Britain* (2000) and *Islam and the West Post 9/11* (2004).

The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship is important for the study of Sufism in the United States as it is a good example of how Muslim spiritual movements passed through a variety of stages: firstly catering for American converts and spiritual seekers and then increasingly beginning to serve the developing migrant communities from the Muslim world thereby moving closer to orthodox Islam (2004, 144).

For Geaves, it is the transition of the Fellowship through different waves, such as its early “American converts and spiritual seekers” and then its appeal to “migrant communities from the Muslim world” which meant for a shift towards “orthodox Islam.” From Hermansen’s categories of hybridity and South Asian rootedness, one hears from Geaves above that the Fellowship is a “Muslim spiritual movement” that began with a perennial bend and transitioned to “orthodox Islam” because of the need to serve the “migrant communities.” In the scholars’ perception of this community (however distinctly they explain the relationship) there is orientation towards two poles that of “orthodoxy” perhaps mainly towards immigrant Muslims (South Asians) and universality, due to membership from American spiritual seekers. These categorizations and labels only further warrant the question *what is the Fellowship?*

It is here that Gisela Webb’s<sup>52</sup> scholarship provides insight in how to answer this question. Webb was one of the earliest scholars to study this group and in “Tradition and Innovation in Contemporary American Islamic Spirituality: the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship” (1994), she captures the tendencies that scholars such as Geaves (2004) and

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<sup>52</sup> Gisela Goodrich T. Webb is a Professor of Religious Studies in the Department of Religion at Seton Hall University in New Jersey. She teaches courses on World Religions, Religious Dimension of Life, Islamic Studies, Women, Gender and Islam, Women in Religion, Inter-religious Dialogue and Death and Dying. Her areas of research include Islamic intellectual and mystical traditions, both historically and in the present, Islam in America, Muslim Women’s rights.



Hermansen (1997; 2014) are alluding to in their studies. Yet where these scholars approached the Fellowship through singular lens, Webb challenges this framework by suggesting multiplicity of co-existences of Sufism as the Fellowship. One of the many queries that Webb reflects on in her early article is “Can any conclusions be drawn with regard to the question of whether Bawa Muhaiyaddeen and the fellowship function in a ‘conserving’ manner vis-à-vis ‘the tradition’ or whether they depart from traditional Islamic values and practice” (1994, 77). In engaging with this question, Webb illustrates that the Fellowship is an example of “the process of transmission of Islamic belief and practice in the contemporary American context” (1994, 99). Her conclusions signal to the heart of another question that underlies studies of the Fellowship, but generally Sufism and its place in North America, is it an example of “traditional Islamic values and practices” or an innovation of North American spirituality or both?

In her most recent contribution Webb uses the Fellowship as a case study to “offer insights” into the development of Sufism in North America (2013, 197). She understands the Fellowship as a Sufi community, one with a uniquely American history. She writes that in its early institutional days, the Fellowship emerged out of the 1970s era of counter-culture of America and shifted to “‘normative’ Islam in the 1980s and 1990s” (Webb 2013, 197). Webb points to the Fellowship’s “multiethnic” makeup and the variety of “interpretations of Sufism’s relation to Islam- ‘Sufi-Muslim,’ ‘Sufi-not Muslim’, and ‘Muslim-not Sufi’- under the umbrella of the ‘Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship and Mosque” (Webb 2013, 198). Webb places Bawa’s teachings not only as “wisdom teachings” but also as an example of the “dynamics of the transmission of Sufism in the context of developments of Islam, diaspora religion as well as interfaith and intrafaith relations in the United States” (2013, 198). She concludes by highlighting “three major orientations” in the Fellowship:

[T]hose who come for Bawa's wisdom teachings on the interior, "universalist core" experience of Islam alone (focusing on acquiring Islam as a state of purity and unity that transcends religious forms); those who came for the mosque and (non-Sufi) Islamic religious practices and celebrations; and those who came for both the mystical teachings and exoteric practices of Islam, the latter of which are seen as an exteriorization of the inner experience and an important means of fostering community life and continuity (Webb 2013, 202).

For Webb, then, the Fellowship is both a community space for local Muslims in the Philadelphia area, and also a movement that developed out of the counter-cultural era in America. More than the Fellowship and the mosque, as GhaneaBassiri (2010) noted above, it is the *mazar* of Bawa that is a distinct space amongst the Fellowship as a whole, according to Webb as well. Instead of labeling the Fellowship within one typology, as presented above by some scholars, Webb shifts the paradigm about the Fellowship by acknowledging that these different currents of Sufism co-exist within one community and this co-existent nature of the Fellowship may in fact be representative of the co-existences of the Sufism in North America. Yet, Webb in her scholarship has not fully provided the ways in which these co-existences of Sufism in the Fellowship unfold and are even maintained. And this is where the current study enters in capturing the ways in which these co-existences of traditions of being Sufi in North America, are maintained, negotiated and contested in the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship.

As I move through spaces and capture members' voices in the chapters in this section and the next, even Webb's categories of Sufi-Muslim, Sufi-non-Muslim and Muslim non-Sufi appear far too simplistic for the complex lived realities noted in the Fellowship in North

America, and even more so in Sri Lanka. The Fellowship contains all the tendencies from universal leanings to *shari'a* based Sufism to newly arrived immigrant Muslims and within these categories, there are even further subcategories of identities and ways of being in the Fellowship, and thus *ways of being a Sufi*. This type of analysis requires a shift towards lived and embodied experiences in the Fellowship and thus a turn towards its people, its spaces and its rituals (McGuire 2008; Orsi 1999, 2010, 2013). New waves of scholars in the field of Sufism in North America are turning towards this lived reality as a methodological approach (Finnegan 2011; Hazen 2011; Dickson 2015). This shift necessitates engagement with diversity and plurality, predicated on negotiation, as lived realities of Sufism, especially in light of external challenges to Sufism and Islam in America.

### **Negotiating Diversity in Sufism in an Age of Islamophobia and Anti-Sufism**

Webb in situating the Fellowship in her study explains how globalization has presented numerous challenges to the growth of Sufism and the Fellowship in North America:

Globalization has had its impact on the development of Sufi communities in North America as they responded to the increased number of immigrants coming to the United States from predominantly Muslim countries, global Islamic revivalism, and heightened religious and political self-consciousness in Muslim immigrant communities. The turn of the century also saw a proliferation of intercommunity, interfaith discussions and forums (not only interdenominational but inter-Sufi, between Sufi and non-Sufi Muslim, between Sufi and non-Muslim, and between Muslim and non-Muslim) particularly in response to September 11, on terrorism and radicalism in Islam the Middle East crisis, and the

development of Web sites to bring access to histories and literatures of Sufism, past and present (Webb 2013, 197).

The Fellowship is presently at a crucible that confronts its existence as an American Muslim Sufi community with immigrant and African-American Sufi-Muslims and non-Sufi Muslims and Euro-American non-Muslim Sufi members. Such a distinct community as this sits in Philadelphia, in a climate in which race politics (especially African-American identity politics) are at its zenith. It also is developing in a post-9/11 context, in which media portrayals of terrorism and radicalism provokes the Fellowship from one side and anti-Sufi sentiments and outlooks squeeze it from the other. In spite of these externally imposing challenges, the Fellowship as an institution has developed based on a mandate of co-existing approaches to Islam, Sufism and spirituality.

#### *Fellowship in an Age of Twenty-First Century Islamophobia*

Bawa and his communities from Sri Lanka to America developed in a climate of systematic Islamophobia. In Sri Lanka Muslim minority communities were the target of violent riots and discrimination.<sup>53</sup> In the United States, especially during the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Bawa spoke out against the representation of Islam in the media and the hijacking of Islam by political and religious leaders for political agendas. This particular incident was captured in *Time Magazine* in 1980 and resulted in one of the earliest publications by the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship Press entitled *Islam and World Peace* (1987), immediately after Bawa's death. Bawa emerges out of an era in which Muslims have faced systematic acrimony, violence and

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<sup>53</sup> Please see Chapter 4's sub-sections on the history of Islam and *Sufism in Sri Lanka* for a discussion of this history of Muslims in Sri Lanka.

persecution in two very distinct geo-political regions, and through his leadership institutionalized spaces, rituals and interpretations of Islam that utilized diversity and plurality and not uniformity or exclusivity.

From movies to television shows, it is the popular image of the *Muslim*, especially the *Arab Muslim* who becomes the hallmark of fanatical Islam. El-Aswad expresses that “These global depictions of Muslims have generated what is known as Islamophobia or irrational fear of Muslims [...and has] also led to serious questions concerning indigenous cultures, identities of Muslim diaspora and the emergence of what is so-called Islamist terrorism” (el-Aswad 2013, 41). Islamophobia in its varying localized currents has manifested as a fear of “Islam” as a result of essentializing all Muslims as a block to be feared. The latter also becomes critical to the rhetoric employed by those in politics and intellectual circles, especially in liberal western democracies to utilize fear mongering as a means to pass laws, heighten security or even win during elections (Bleich 2012; Hammer 2013). Julianne Hammer<sup>54</sup> in her contribution to Carl Ernst’s<sup>55</sup> edited volume *Islamophobia in America* (2013), challenges the perception that Islamophobia is simply fear of Muslims:

Literally meaning ‘fear of Islam,’ Islamophobia is not about innate or natural fear of Islam or Muslims. Rather, it is an ideological construct produced and reproduced at the

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<sup>54</sup> Hammer is an Associate Professor and Kenan Rifai Scholar of Islamic Studies and Director of Undergraduate Studies at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her areas of interest includes American Muslims, gender discourses in America Muslim communities, Muslim women’s and gender studies, theory and method in the study of Islam, Sufism and food, modern and contemporary Muslim approaches to the Qur’an and marriage, family and sexuality in religions.

<sup>55</sup> Ernst is a specialist in Islamic Studies, with a focus on West and South Asia. His language of research includes Arabic, Persian and Urdu. His areas of study include general and critical issues of Islamic Studies, premodern and contemporary Sufism, and Indo-Muslim culture. He is now the William R. Kenan, Jr., Distinguished Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the Co-Director of the Carolina Center for the Study of Middle East and Muslim Civilizations. He is also one of the co-editors of the Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks Series at the University of North Carolina Press.

nexus of a number of political and intellectual currents that need to be taken into consideration and assessed critically in each instance or event of Islamophobic discourse and practice (2013, 108).

In these “ideological constructs” perpetuated by proponents of Islamophobia, it is often the bodies of women, for instance, that become the greatest producers of this fear, in what Hammer calls “gendered Islamophobia.” This can be seen in public and media treatments of honour killings, forced marriages and the supposed systematic oppression of women who wear the hijab or the *burqa*, which itself is a complicated residue of the orientalist gaze and portrayal of Muslim women (Hammer 2013, 116). Hammer adds further:

Thus Muslim women here were merely objects of a hate discourse that in other incarnations assumes their continued oppression by Islam and violent Muslim men. They are not spoken to, but rather spoken about, a common feature of much of Islamophobic discourse as we have seen it reincarnate in various forms over the last decade. Second, these ‘statements’ demonstrate the centrality of Muslim women as beaten, oppressed, molested, and violated in these discourses. The protestors are familiar with the tropes of such discourse including the accusation that Muhammad married a young girl, that Muslim men routinely abuse their wives, and that the menace of Islam has something to do with ‘shari‘ah’ (2013, 116).

The stereotype of the treatment of Muslim women and their subjugation at the hands of the Muslim men manifests a rhetoric and image that goes hand in hand with the suspicion of

minorities in America. The anxiety towards minority Muslims highlights the undertones of racism that lies in Islamophobia. This presents a unique trajectory in which Islamophobia has manifested in America, as not only does it intersect with issues of race, culture and ethnicity it is also gendered when it comes to Muslims and fear of them.<sup>56</sup> As Ernst writes:

Islamophobia fits into certain structural aspects of the way American society deals with recent minorities during times of crisis. Anti-Islamic rhetoric draws upon the repertoire of religious bigotry as well as traditional American racism, but it is given a particular spice by the element of gender and stereotypes about oppressed Muslim women (2013, 7).

The rhetoric of fear as an ideology, across these vast spheres, is consistent; the Qur'an justifies the killing of non-Muslims or permits lying to non-Muslims, Islam is antithetical to western democracy and Muslims are procreating at warp speed in order to take over the world. These irrational ideological constructs reduce radical and militant Islamism (Salafi-jihadis) to Islam

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<sup>56</sup> Examples of unique race conscious Muslim movements that developed in America include the Moorish Science Temple (MST) and the Nation of Islam. The Moorish Science Temple was founded by Noble Drew Ali, who traced the lineage of African Americans to Morocco and referred to them as "Moors" who were not "black" or "negro" but "Asiatics" and "Muslim by nature" (Curtis 2009, 34). In 1930 an enigmatic figure known as Wallace D. Fard, a peddler in the black neighbourhoods of Detroit established the Nation of Islam (NOI). It was the Elijah Poole, who came to be known as Elijah Muhammad, who believed that Fard was the *madhi* (messiah), but also God incarnated and proclaimed himself the messenger of this God. To Elijah Muhammad, black Muslims were the original race who was disrupted by a scientist named Yacub who created the "white devils" (Curtis 2009, 37). Fard and Elijah Muhammad were sent to bring the black people back to Islam. With Fard's disappearance in 1934, Elijah Muhammad moved to Chicago. Perhaps most notable within the development of this movement was the powerful presence and voice of Malcolm X (born Malcolm Little and later was El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz), who brought the Nation of Islam (NOI) and its prophet Elijah Muhammad to it heights, establishing temples in Boston, Philadelphia and New York City (Curtis 2009; Grewal 2013; Howell 2014). Malcolm would go on to leave the Nation and follow Sunni Islam, though shortly after his return from *hajj* (pilgrimage) he was assassinated. The assassination of Malcolm X, and the presence of these race conscious movements in Philadelphia form an important climate into which Bawa Muhaiyaddeen arrives in Philadelphia to start his ministry. Many African-Americans, who came to Bawa and the Fellowship, come from this race-based consciousness and were influenced by this racialized climate.

proper, forgetting at times the intricate and complicated ongoing and historic political relations of western nations with Muslim ones (i.e., colonialism).

Islamophobia manifests in “multidimensional” contexts and is related to the negative perception of Islam and Muslims, leading to systematic manifestations of Islamophobia (Bleich 2013, 181). But Islamophobia does not only unfold in the American or European contexts, these currents of systematic oppression of Muslims have been seen elsewhere such as amongst some Burmese Rohingya in a Buddhist nationalistic context (Green 2013) or the 2002 pogroms in Gujarat, which erupted due to caste and religious tensions between Hindu-Muslim communities (Dhattiwala and Biggs 2012). The Sri Lankan case remains distinct still, as Muslims are treated as an ethnic block that are caught between the “competing nationalisms” of the Sinhala majority and Tamil minority groups (Amarasingam and Xavier, forthcoming).

This climate has only worsened since Bawa’s death, especially with events such as 9/11, which have further marginalized Muslims in America. The rise of Islamophobia in America and globally, is due in part to the media coverage of Salafi-jihadist movements that have gained some traction in parts of the Middle East. A recent illustrative example of this is ISIL or ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant or the Islamic State, which have beheaded minority Muslims and Christians in the regions they have occupied, destroyed sacred shrines and historical monuments and have attracted male and female foreign fighters to their cause from across the globe. These movements have developed on the basis of purifying Islam, and as such see it as their aim to purge Sufism from Islam.



### *Anti-Sufism and Sufism*<sup>57</sup>

Like most religious traditions, Islam is inherently pluralistic and contains different sectarian, theological, legal and philosophical systems, which developed in culturally rich parts of the world. At the heart of this diversity lie varying interpretational tendencies towards the maintenance of Islamic tradition and authority, especially as a response to modernity and western powers. This is captured in the terms *tajdid* (renewal) and *islah* (reform) wherein a broad spectrum of historical reformers and revivalist (liberal, progressive, traditional, conservative etc) have variously defined Islam in relation to the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (*sunnah*) (Voll 1983). It is the ways in which Islam and Muslim identity have been articulated by different figures across its history that has set the complex parameters of Sufism and anti-Sufism.

Martin van Bruinessen (2009)<sup>58</sup> writes that the dynamics between anti-Sufi and Sufi groups are very much localized in nature though the common points of criticism have been towards

visits to the tombs of saints, especially when their purpose is to demand intercession or help; the use of music, dance or drugs to produce state of ecstasy or changed awareness; the invocation of spirits of saints living or dead through recitation of special prayers and litanies; the attribution of miraculous powers to Sufi shaykhs and the traffic in magic objects such as amulets; and the unconditional surrender of the individual devotee to a Sufi master (2009, 125).

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<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth Sirriyeh in *Sufis and Anti-Sufis: The Defence, Rethinking, and Rejection of Sufism in the Modern World*, (Surrey, UK: Curzon, 1999) developed the term "anti-Sufism."

<sup>58</sup> Van Bruinessen is a Professor of the Comparative Study of Contemporary Muslim Societies. His research areas have included Kurdistan, Afghanistan and Indonesia. He was involved in the establishment of the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) and occupied the ISIM chair at Utrecht University. He is the author of several books and co-edited *Sufism and the 'Modern' in Islam* (2007).

Such practices are sometimes viewed as *bid'a* or “innovation” by those with anti-Sufi leanings, which are “reprehensible innovations alien to pristine Islam, and explained as borrowings from other religious traditions or as corrupt deformations of authentic Islamic practices” (2009, 125). Although many different anti-Sufi movements developed throughout Islamic history most were inspired by Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). It is Ibn Taymiyya’s ideologies that were further refined narrowly by Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792) (van Bruinessen 2009, 125; Weismann 2007) in the Arabian Peninsula that proved to have a lasting impact in anti-Sufi currents that are globally manifesting. In this regard Ibn Taymiyya’s criticisms against Sufism are important to unpack briefly.

The jurist and hadith scholar Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) emerged from a family of Hanbali scholars, though he would align with Salafi leanings (or preserving of the traditions of the early Muslims).<sup>59</sup> During his life, he experienced trauma at the hands of the Mongol invaders who arrived from the steppes of Mongolian mountains from the east and ruthlessly destroyed villages and peoples who stood in their way. This along with the fragmentation of the Muslim empires and the beginning of the end of the Abbasid Caliphate serves as the context in which Ibn Taymiyya matured as an ideologue (Sarrio 2011). He would go on to take over his father’s position as the teacher of Hanbali law, and began to gain criticism from his contemporaries for his interpretations of theology and law, especially because of his literalistic interpretations of the Qur’an, which led to his imprisonment in Syria. Specifically, it was his

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<sup>59</sup> Within Sunni tradition of Islam there are four legalistic schools of thought, or *madhabs*, that are usually adhered to. Their prominence and practice is regionally based. The Hanafi School was founded by Abu Hanifa (d. 787) exists in regions of South Asia. The Maliki School was founded by Malik ibn Anas (d. 795) and is often found in regions of North Africa. The Shaf’i school founded by Muhammad ibn Idries ash-Sha’fi (d. 820) and is usually found in South East Asia. The Hanbali School was founded by Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 855) and is mainly practiced in the Arabian Peninsula (i.e., Saudi Arabia, Qatar etc.). The Hanbali School became most affiliated with the Salafi tradition, though Hanbali theologians, such as Abdul Qadir Jilani, were also prominent Sufis.

ideas of *tashbih* (anthropomorphism) that created the greatest of challenges for his contemporaries. He became a

Combative polemicist against everything that, in his eyes, affected the unity of Islam: extremist Shii sects, Islamic rationalist theologians and peripatetic philosophers, Sufis of monistic tendency, the morally corrupting influence of the People of the Book, and exaggerated expressions of popular religiosity (Sarrío 2011, 275).

Ibn Taymiyya's focus on the Qur'an, Sunnah and the early Muslims (*salaf*) as the central authorities in the tradition of Islam, led him to lambaste the emergence of saint veneration and pilgrimages to Sufi shrines, practices that came to represent some Sufism in his time. This is what he would define as *bid'a* (innovation), a practice that jeopardized the absolute monotheism of God, by ascribing partners to God (*shirk*). He was nonetheless an advocate of Sufi piety or absolute faith (*iman*) a tradition that resonated with his understanding of Allah and has been tied to Sufi groups (with *shari'a* orientations), but not the populist practices that were emerging around him, which he understood as "excesses" or "innovations" (Knysh 1999, 88).<sup>60</sup>

Ibn Taymiyya's reproach was mostly towards the great Andalusian Sufi master Ibn Arabi<sup>61</sup> and his followers according to the scholar Alexander Knysh (1999).<sup>62</sup> The metaphysical

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<sup>60</sup> For an excellent exploration of Ibn Taymiyya's doctrine of sainthood please see "Spiritual anti-elitism: Ibn Taymiyya's Doctrine of Sainthood (*walaya*)" in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* in Vol. 22, No. 3, July 2011, pp. 275-291.

<sup>61</sup> Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240) was an Andalusian Sufi mystic, philosopher and saint and was known as the greatest master (*al shaykh al-akbar*). Born in Murcia, Spain, his most seminal works include the *Futuh al-Makkiyya* or the *Meccan Illuminations* and the *Fusus al-Hikam* (*the Bezels of Wisdom*). He also wrote poetry and many devotional prayers. For more on Ibn Arabi please see Stephen Hirtstein's *The Unlimited Mercifier* (1993) or the publications put forth by the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/index.html> (Accessed June 8, 2015).

<sup>62</sup> Knysh is a Professor of Islamic Studies at the Department of Near Eastern Studies at the University of Michigan. His research areas are on Islamic mysticism and Islamic theological, philosophical, and juridical thought in

thesis of God's manifestation continuously in His own creations, or the doctrine of monism espoused by Ibn Arabi, would be the basis of Ibn Taymiyya's opprobrium against him and his followers (Knysh 1999). As Kynsh writes

Ibn Taymiyya bemoans the spread of the doctrine of oneness/monism (*wahda*) and unificationism (*ittihad*) among his contemporaries, many of whom, in his view, are deluded by the smoothly speaking Sufi elders who claim to have received their knowledge directly from God (1999, 92).

Ibn Taymiyya's own complex relationship to Sufism and to Ibn Arabi specifically, has often been collapsed in the proliferation of his teachings or its resurrection amongst later ideologues at different iterations in history, specifically as it manifested within Muslim political movements. For instance, some of his teachings would influence the Wahhabi movement that emerged in the Arabian Peninsula. This trajectory of thought would bring about the stark polarization of Sufism and anti-Sufism as experienced in some quarters of Muslim societies today.

One form of Islamic revival, or a call to return to a pure Islam, is found in the Wahhabi movement. Though first postulated by Ibn Taymiyya, it was the scholar and preacher Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792) from Najd in Arabia, who centuries later sought a return to the original and pure faith by preaching against innovation and superstitions even at times through arms. Wahhab wrote that his was an age of "*Jahiliyya*" or ignorance, usually attributed to the period

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historical perspective. He is currently working on a book to complement his *Islamic Mysticism* (2000). It is a study that engages with societal, educational, cultural and political roles of Sufi teachings, practices and institutions in the modern and post-modern age. He also has interest in Islam and Empire in the Northern Caucasus.

before Prophet Muhammad brought forth the new revelations of Islam (Sirriyeh 1999, 3). He adds: “The idolators of our own time are worse in their idolatry than the ancients because the ancients were worshipping God in times of affliction and associating others with Him in times of prosperity, but the idolators of our own time are always guilty of associating others with God whether in property or affiliation” (quoted in Sirriyeh 1999, 3). According to Wahhab, the act of ascribing partners to Allah, such as through venerating or praying to Sufi saints (*awliya*) or Shi‘a imams at tombs, would be the greatest demise of humanity. This attempt to purify Islam of extraneous influences, known as Islamic revivalism (renewalism), intended to return to the practices of Prophet Muhammad and his immediate companions (*salaf al-salih*), while affirming *tawhid* (unity of God). This movement gained political traction in the Arabian Peninsula with the alignment of the family of Al Sa’ud in the eighteenth century and would also further define the Kingdom of Saudia Arabia in 1932.

The contemporary Salafi movement would further diversify due to responses to modernity and attitudes towards the west and Islam’s relationship to it. One of the first political activists and the father of Islamic modernism was the reformer Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897<sup>63</sup> who in the twentieth century called for a purification of Islam through the homogenization of the global *ummah* (Muslim community), which necessitated the removal of Sufism from Islam. He along with the Egyptian theologian Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905)

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<sup>63</sup> Al-Afghani was a journalist, political activist who advocated Pan-Islamic ideals. He was greatly influenced by his vast travels from India to Egypt and the experience of the colonial powers. His writings would be immensely popular for movements in the twentieth century. Keddie writes in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World* that his influences were dependent on three factors: “[...] he reflected ideas that have become increasingly popular in the Muslim world since the late nineteenth century, including nationalism, Pan-Islamism, and the identification of many new ideas with Islam” (Keddie, Nikki R. "Afghānī, Jamāl al-Dīn al-." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com.libproxy.wlu.ca/article/opr/t236/e0022> [accessed 21-Mar-2015]).

stressed the authority of the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>64</sup> This call to renewal took place amidst broader initiatives by these leaders to restore Islamic law and education and the Arabic language. The Salafis asserted that only God must be worshiped and no intermediary can be sought.<sup>65</sup> Individuals inclined towards these interpretations acquired the name Salafis from *salaf*, 'the ancients' or 'those who precede or have gone before', while the term Wahhabi has also been loosely used and misused at times, equating it with radical Islamic fundamentalism.

Influential Salafi movements would include Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt founded by Hassan al-Banna (d. 1949)<sup>66</sup> and the Jamaati-i Islami of Pakistan founded by the political activist, scholar and educator Sayyid Abu al-'Ala Mawdudi (d. 1979).<sup>67</sup> It is the even smaller fraction of the Salafi groups, known as the Salafi-Jihadis (literalist Salafism), such as Al-Qaeda, which represent the marriage of Wahhabi/Salafi theology with militant activism.<sup>68</sup> Their narrow

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<sup>64</sup> Abduh was an Egyptian religious scholar, journalist, theologian, jurist and in the last years of his life the grand mufti of Egypt. He studied at al-Azhar University and was influenced by Sufism (Shadhili Order), which he would later renounce. Abduh was greatly influenced and drawn to the Pan-Islamism advocated by al-Afghani. He felt that western models of science and technology were compatible with Islamic teachings. Abduh felt that reason and divine revelation worked together to support faith and religious knowledge. For more see Fazlur Rahman's *Islam and Modernity* (1982) and Albert Hourani's *Arabic thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (1962).

<sup>65</sup> For more on Abdul Wahhab and the Salafi movement please see Sirriyeh (1999). For more on Salafi movement please see Quintan Wiktorowicz's article "the Salafi Movement: Violence and Fragmentation of Community" in *Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop* (2005).

<sup>66</sup> Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949) was born in Egypt and was trained as a teacher. He founded the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan al-Muslimeen) as a revivalist organization due to British colonial presence. The movement gained popularity and had over a million members. Al-Banna was assassinated in 1949, likely by Egyptian security agents.

<sup>67</sup> Mawlana Sayyid Abu al-Ala Mawdudi was born in Hyderabad, India in 1903. He was a scholar, political theorist, and commentator of the Qur'an. He was also the founder and the leader of the Jama'at-i Islami, a South Asian Islamic party, which wanted an Islamic Pakistan.

<sup>68</sup> Contemporary Salafi movements and thought are themselves not uniform in ideology. For instance, Tariq Ramadan, the grandson of the Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna, self-identifies as a "Salafi reformist" one that is distinct from "political literalist Salafism" (usually tied to Wahhabi and anti-Sufi movements). The Swiss born Ramadan is a Professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies at Oxford University (Oriental Institute, St Anthony's College) and also lectures internationally. He is a social activist and public figure. He has gained much attention from European Muslim youth. For more on his work please see *Islam and the Arab Awakening* (2012); *The Arab Awakening: Islam and the New Middle East* (2012); *The Quest for Meaning, Developing a Philosophy of Pluralism* (2010); *What I Believe* (2009); *Radical Reform, Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (2008).

interpretation of Islamic law calls for the establishment of an Islamic state that purifies Islam of all localized cultural and non-Islamic influences, such as Sufis and Shi'a Islam. Elizabeth Sirriyeh<sup>69</sup> explains how these formative currents within Islam further polarized during the heights of colonial encroachment upon Muslim societies. She writes:

For the most part, it is the more traditional and largely indigenous thought for and against Sufism that has proved most durable, tariqas, whether traditional or reformed to any extent, facing anti-Sufi organizations modeled on ideologies owing much to the Wahhabis and Salafis. Both Sufis and anti-Sufis have flourished in the contemporary Islamic revival and frequently continue to be embattled, although at times they may also show awareness of the need to overcome differences in order to withstand the threat to both from the creeping dangers of secularism and of the attractions of material world (Sirriyeh, 1999, 175).

The most systematic historical example of the purging of Sufism, for the purposes of a secular state, was seen in the leadership of Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk) (d. 1938) in Turkey. The latter resulted in the banning of many religious communities and their spaces, including Sufi shrines and tombs. While the contemporary Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia has opposed Sufism and Shi'ism because of their opposition to the monotheism of Islam.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Sirriyeh is a Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies in the School of Philosophy, Religion and History of Science at the University of Leeds. Her areas of research are Islamic Studies, especially Sufism and Islamic reform, dreaming and dream interpretation in Islam, religion in Ottoman Syria and Muslim ideological disputes and the interface between Islamic and modern Western thought.

<sup>70</sup> For instance, Rumi's shrine and complex, which is at the center of Konya, is now treated as a cultural museum and not a religious center, though many attend this site as forms of pilgrimages (Aslan 2014).

Sufism historically maintained centrality as a form of Islamic spirituality and piety in most Islamic civilizations. However, varying responses by reformist and revivalist movements resulted in the marginalization of Sufism, due to external pressures of colonialism and perceived understanding that they were living in an era of ignorance. As a result some would blame Sufism for either corrupting Islam or adding to the reasons why Islamic authority and power declined in the world. As Sufi traditions, personages, philosophies and spaces were pushed to the margins in regions where they historically maintained Islamic capital, Sufism would further find new enthusiasts amongst Europeans and Americans, especially in literary mode and spiritual non-Islamic outlooks. To understand any study of contemporary Sufism, one must first understand Sufism's historical relationship to Islam and the ways in which it has shifted internally within Islam. These transformations have been influenced not only by Islam's own complex relationship with Sufism, but also with non-Islamic traditions' interest in Sufism. These multidimensional relationships form the basis in which Sufism, and thus the Fellowship, has developed in the contemporary context.

Sufism's emergence within Islam and its subsequent compatibility with the cultural and religious landscape of America presents a distinct development in North America. When the Fellowship is labelled, the act of labelling itself captures the implicit (and sometimes explicit) need to assess the Islamicness and Sufiness of a community, which then points to the need to determine whether Sufism in North America is *authentic*, *orthodox* and *legitimate*. Hence why it is important to note that Bawa and the Fellowship have been at the heart of a dynamic naming and renaming process. This lack of consensus in labeling the Fellowship should be a moment of self-reflexivity wherein scholars explore why the Fellowship has incurred more messy labels as opposed to neat boxes and what the politics of defining a movement as Sufi or Sufi-Islamic in



America entails. Therefore, the Fellowship is more than a case study of Sufism in North America. It is a reminder of the need to reorient the study of the diversity of Islam and Muslim societies in global contexts. Studies of complex Sufi communities, like the Fellowship, do this by calling for a reassertion of Sufism's inherent plurality.

### *Diversity of the Fellowship*

The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship is not a Sufi *tariqa*, or order, in the traditional sense. Though the Fellowship is associated with the Qadiriyya tradition, especially of that in Sri Lanka, this connection is both loosely maintained and deeply ingrained. This is seen in the *mawlid*s (birthday) celebrated for the Baghdadi saint Abdul Qadir Jilani<sup>71</sup> the namesake of the Qadiriyya movement in the Fellowship, a tradition instituted by Bawa. Bawa did not provide a traditional *silsila*, or a chain of transmission, as found in most Sufi orders, wherein the teacher maps out the tree of master-disciple relationship leading back to the Prophet Muhammad, usually through his son-in-law and cousin Ali. Even in the name of the movement, there is no signifier to a Sufi association, but rather only an orientation towards the personage of Bawa. The only lineage he created is between himself and his Sri Lankan counterpart communities.

Historically not all influential Sufi teachers created orders, examples of this trend is found in two of the most seminal figures of classical Sufism, Ibn Arabi and Hafiz of Shiraz. It is the philosophy of unity in multiplicity, or diversity as a reflection of the One, associated with Ibn Arabi's *wahdat al wujud*, that won the fervent criticism of Ibn Taymiyya, as noted above. But it was this process of experiencing the Divine in the multiplicity of creation, while not limiting the

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<sup>71</sup> The Baghdadi saint Abdul Qadir Jilani is revered as the head of the lineage of the Qadiri Sufi *tariqa* (path). He was born in circa. 1077-78 C.E in al-Jil, in present day Iran. At the age of eighteen he went to Baghdad for studies (al Jerrahi al-Halveti xv; Schomburg 21). He died at the age of 91 in 1166 C.E and his tomb remains in a *madrasa* of Bab al-Daraja in Baghdad (al Jerrahi al-Halveti XLIV). He was a formative Hanbali scholar and theologian, and represents a Sufi tradition based in *shari'a*. His name is representative of the Qadiriyya, which has an expansive reach. Its influence in Sri Lanka is discussed in Chapter 4's subsection *Sufism in Sri Lanka*.

Divine to creation, that resulted in the universalism or monism (or existence as one) espoused by Sufis, such as Rumi and Hafiz, a trend that is found in Bawa's own teachings. Understanding this outlook, that diversity is indeed a manifestation of one essence, as central to Bawa's philosophy gives context to why his Fellowship manifested diversely while maintaining a singularity.

Bawa instituted a movement with elements of traditional Sufi orders while also disseminating his understanding of Islam and Sufism into a movement that captured his legacy. His life, as well as his Fellowship, then would integrate traditional with the contemporary; it would manifest in spaces such as farms, community centers and mosque-shrine complexes. His movement was inclusive of religions, cultures and genders, and while it also cultivated a particular Islamic piety it was not solely defined by it. Bawa and the Fellowship are both transnational and local, both universal and traditional. It is American and South Asian, but also beyond these geographies and cultures. With such a dynamic life, his ministry, his spaces, practices, disciples and discourses would dwell in the realm of diversity. A diversity that was externally challenged at the behest of Muslims who found Sufism and teachers like Bawa a disgrace to the message of the Prophet Muhammad, and Islamophobes who found Islam as a whole a backward and rigid religion. Yet in the crucible of resistance and efforts of homogenization, Bawa developed institutions predicated upon heterogeneity and evoked the prophetic traditions of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, while also summoning the lives of Buddha and the Hindu deity Murukan. This co-existence of diversities captures the language of the Fellowship, a language grounded on Bawa's Islam and Sufism.

Roy P. Mottahedeh (2010)<sup>72</sup> situates this tradition of pluralism at the heart of Sufi understanding, one that is based in the Qur’anic *Surah al-Ma’ida* (the Table Spread).<sup>73</sup> Mottahedeh uses this Qur’anic imperative as the basis of the “pluralism” that would inspire Sufis for centuries. According to interpretations of Rumi, for instance, human beings possess within their own beings plurality (2010, 41). The acceptance of plurality and difference around human existence is equivalent to accepting others as ourselves. In interpreting Rumi, Mottahedeh writes, “[f]or him, it is a logical necessity that people dispute about religion, even among Muslims. God put the arguments in us, each of whom contains a wide variety of opinions” (Mottahedeh 2010, 41). He goes on to express that

The message of Rumi is not some mealy-mouth multiculturalism. Rumi is a devout believer. Yet he recognizes that others are not only free to disagree with him, but that God supplies the arguments of disagreements. Certainty is structurally impossible in the mundane realm and, as the Sufi theologian al-Ghazali had said, instead of ‘true religion’ we have human knowledge of religion. Yet we all see the high value of truth and right belief and would surrender to it if it were self-evident. Correct belief may be one path, but all imaginable forms of belief live inside us and their presence is not to be denied (Mottahedeh 2010, 42).

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<sup>72</sup> Mottahedeh is the Gurney Professor of History at Harvard University. His publications include *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (1980), *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (1985), *The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and Muslim World* (co-edited with Angeliki Laiou) (2001) and *Lessons in Islamic Jurisprudence* (2003).

<sup>73</sup> This reads: “To you We sent the scripture with truth, confirming the scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety; so judge between them by what God has revealed, and follow not their vain desires, diverging from the truth that has come to you. To each among you have We prescribed a law and a clear way. If God had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but [God’s plan] is to test you in what He has given you; so vie with each other in good works. The goal of all is [to hasten] toward God; for it is [God] who will show you the truth of the matters in which you differ” (quoted in Mottahedeh 2005, 42).

Sufis, such as Rumi, saw the plurality visible in the world as the imperative of the Qur'an. This philosophy and outlook is represented in Bawa and his Fellowship. This plurality is not only inclusive of Islam, but also from a Qur'anic Sufi interpretative paradigm is a continuation of the revelations given to previous Abrahamic traditions, in which Adam the patriarch of humanity is the first Sufi.

The interaction and negotiation between these forms of Sufism, both as it emerges in Muslim majority Islamic and non-Islamic spheres, is when narratives of transformations and continuities are captured, because they highlight complementary incongruities while apprehending Sufism as a living dynamic in North America. The Fellowship, and Sufism in North America, provide an example in which contestation unfolds in shared identities. In unpacking the contestations based on different interpretations, it is the commonalities that are unearthed, which are far more similar than one imagined them to be. It is in this way that Islam and Sufism formed and spread to new regions and cultures. Approaching this plurality as inherent in Sufism is important to understanding the manifestation that the Fellowship has taken in North America. It also challenges one to recognize that this has been one of the facets of Islam generally. As Abdul Aziz Said, Meena Sharify-Funk<sup>74</sup> et al write:

[...] the fact that so much has been integrated within Islamic cultures indicates that Islam is not only a theological doctrine, but also a historical dynamic. As a historical dynamic,

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<sup>74</sup> Professor Abdul Aziz Said was a Professor at the School of International Service at American University in Washington, DC, where he held the Mohammad Said Farsi Chair of Islamic Peace. He was also the Founding Director of International Peace and Conflict Resolution and Director Emeritus and Founder for the Center for Global Peace. He has published extensively on Islam and Peace. He recently retired after six decades of teaching and service at American University, where he was awarded with numerous honours, awards and fellowships. Meena Sharify-Funk is an Associate Professor at Wilfrid Laurier University in the Religion and Culture Department. Her areas of research are contemporary Islamic thought and identity, gender and Islam and Sufism.

Islam was often a quite inclusive enterprise, embodying a spirit of encounter with the other. Just as it is impossible to understand classical Islamic civilization without reference to the dynamic roles played by non-Muslim minorities, so too is it misleading to formulate an understanding of Western civilization that excludes the contributions of Islam (Said, Sharify-Funk, et al, 2006, 4).

The current study's approach is one of the above highlighted dynamism and dialecticism. Sufism in North America follows a path of reciprocity, though however unequal it may have been. It is not merely the "Americanness" of Sufism or the "Sufiness" of America that needs be determined and compartmentalized in studies of Sufism in North America. Approaching Sufism in America through this paradigm of lived, embodied and negotiated diversity means one no longer requires labels and categories to qualify if a Sufi group is Islamic enough or American enough. One no longer needs to determine if a Sufi group that emerged in America is *orthodox* or *authentic*, rather our perceptions of Sufism shift to the understanding that it is a *dynamic* that contains historicity, theology, inclusivity, spirituality, diversity and Americanness and Islamicness and much more. This must be the basis of approaching Sufism in America, a discourse of inherent diversity mediated through negotiation. It is a shared enterprise of the Muslims and non-Muslims, of immigrants and the Euro-Americans, of males and females. The Fellowship then welcomes one to experience the challenges and significances of the discourse of diversity in Sufism as a lived reality. The movement and dynamic of Sufism not only holds at its fingertips the "the channel for cultural rapprochement between Muslim and Western worlds", but in the process it "has also occasioned transformations and revitalization of this in ways unimaginable a century ago" (Taji-Farouki 2007, 239).

## Conclusions

The Fellowship sits at the crossroads of varying processes that are unfolding with regards to the phenomenon that is Sufism, one that requires the understanding of Sufism's historical development in North America. In this chapter, I outlined two significant currents that led to the development of Sufism in North America, both in relation to Islamic and non-Islamic spiritualities. The first was that of the popularity of Persian poetry amongst European and American literary circles. Sufi literary works appealed to Orientalists who became enamored with the poetry of Hafiz or Saadi of Shiraz. It meant that in this early period, Sufism's acclaim and popularization in the west represented it as a literary tradition outside of Islamic origins. These cultural and literary exchanges primed the reception of Sufism, when it eventually arrived in America through seminal Sufi teachers.

It was with the arrival of Hazrat Inayat Khan in the beginning of the twentieth century that Sufism would for the first time be taught through a living teacher and not through translated poetry. Even then, Hazrat Inayat Khan's dissemination of Sufism as a universal tradition was not limited to Islam. Khan's arrival foreshadowed the emergence of more Sufi *shaykhs* from varying parts of the world. This culminated specifically in the counter-cultural era of the 1960s and 1970s in America, as those who came of age began experimenting with various spiritual movements, which included Buddhism, Sikhism and Hinduism. Into this climate of spiritual revolutions and the creation of new movements in America arrived Sufi teachers, such as Bawa from Sri Lanka. Bawa's arrival to Philadelphia during this period was to be the genesis of the Fellowship, one that emerged out of the gestation of the spiritual awakening taking place in America.

Furthermore, in this chapter I surveyed the ways in which the Fellowship has been represented in the literature on Sufism in North America. Different scholars have categorized the Fellowship either as a hybrid or quasi-Islamic Sufi community, while others such as Safi, have spoken of it as part of the dynamic of Islam in America. Even more, some have viewed the Fellowship as a New Religious Movement or an alternative form of Islamic spirituality. In this literature of the Fellowship, it is Webb's suggestion of the co-existences of the distinctive forms of Sufism within the Fellowship that provided a different approach to examine what the Fellowship is. Though the Fellowship can be understood as a community, which is predicated on diversity as its institutional mandate, this diversity of approaches to Sufism is still challenged in the broader milieu in which the Fellowship is currently situated. Two specific types of external challenges noted in this chapter were that of (1) Islamophobia and (2) anti-Sufism. The challenge of Islamophobia to a community such as the Fellowship, which is associated with Islam, creates anxiety over popular perceptions of Islam, especially of radical Islam, the oppressed women and misunderstandings of the Qur'an. If on the one hand, public fear and anxiety of Islam creates concerns for a Fellowship community that is tied to Islam, the Fellowship's relationship to Sufism further challenges it from some quarters of the Muslim community.

Early anti-Sufi sentiments, such as those put forth by Ibn Taymiyya and then later Abdul Wahhab, decreed that Sufism was a stain on Islam because of its blasphemous excesses. These personalities condemned practices that were deemed as "excesses" and "innovations" in Sufism, especially as they centered on the veneration of Sufi teachers and their spaces of entombment. Modern anti-Sufism in capacities was also employed by varying reformers, revivalists and scholars such as al-Afghani, who were responding to modernity and the experience of the new world order of imperialism and colonialism. As such, some sought to revive the global Muslim

community through pan-Islamism, at the heart of which was a Salafist interpretation of Islam, in which Sufism often had no place.

It is in this context that the current case study of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship is situated. The Fellowship with its spectrum of followers provides an apparatus that challenges one to engage with Sufis through complexity. This dynamic utilizes the discourse of diversity; a language and reality that has been the root of Islam and Sufism from its inception and its different iterations throughout time. From Sufi *shaykhs* who were the center of metaphysical and charismatic movements to their institutionalizations into communities of lodges and entombments that led to veneration, rituals and shared spaces, Sufism has been a transforming and transformative legacy of Islam for Muslims and non-Muslims. Sufism as a social and religious phenomenon returns one to interconnections; networks and transnational ways of being that are hallmarks of the current global climate. The Fellowship provides an opportunity to explore what this entails and how this unfolds; how is Sufism utilized and interpreted by Muslims and non-Muslims? How are spaces, rituals and authority negotiated? How can such vast differences in interpretations of Sufism and Islam manifest in one singular community? It is these questions that the remaining chapters in this section explore.



## Chapter 2

### The History of the Spaces and Practices of the Fellowship

#### Introduction

A “fellowship” connotes a relationship of people who share interests or feelings or an association of people with shared interests and values. The name of the community of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen as a “fellowship” positions it not as a Sufi and/or Muslim or even a religious or spiritual movement, but rather as a group of people with shared experiences and interests in Bawa’s teachings. This is the basis of the institutional origins. The Fellowship has transformed into a far more complex center of activity since its original formation. To explore how this transformation has unfolded, this chapter illustrates the early activities that took place in the Fellowship during Bawa’s tenure and how they compare to the ritual activities noted at the Fellowship Headquarters at present.

In this chapter I map the development of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship in Philadelphia by presenting it as a center of Sufi activities and rituals, while also highlighting the different institutional waves of the Fellowship from its early African-American contingency to its increased presence of immigrant Muslim visitors at present. In this chapter I also focus on the sub-spaces that form the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, to further illustrate how diversity is maintained through spaces in the Fellowship. These sub-spaces include Bawa’s room; the meeting hall and the *masjid* (mosque), in positioning these spaces and their patterns of development, ritual activities and its participants are highlighted. This chapter is not meant to provide a complete institutional history of the Headquarters of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship in Philadelphia, or the branches that formed thereafter.

Throughout this chapter and subsequent chapters, I highlight spaces and rituals. I am aware of the field of ritual studies and the debates that have unfolded within it, particularly in

an effort to determine what constitutes a ritual as such. Often one criterion that is used to define ritual is *place* (Smith 1978; 1987), while another is the *enactment* that unfolds in a place (Grimes 1999). Here I do not wish to weigh into these deliberations more than to say that I have gleaned from both approaches to ritual studies. In my own work I privilege place, as Smith does in speaking of “emplacement” (1978; Green 2007). This is because places form essential nodes that define both sacred and profane activities for this community, especially in relation to cosmologies developed by sacred narrative in Islam. In Sufism particularly, place is further dependent on promixity to a Sufi saint, an exemplary human being whose presence (either in life or in death) imbues her/his holiness to a said place, by their accomplished status. It is this relationship that results in a series of enactments, or rituals, in a place as a means to access the grace (*baraka*) of this saintly figure, because of the saint’s nearness to the divine. Ian Richard Netton<sup>75</sup> (2000) explains this when he writes

Sūfī rituals may all be characterised as signs: they are signs of a way of life, a *tarīqa*, and they are signs of the goal of that *tarīqa* which is God Himself. The rituals are not practiced or undertaken for their own sake but always mirror, and are directed towards, a deeper Reality (11).

Sufi spaces, as sacred places, then are informed by broader sacred geography, narratives and cosmologies that lead to particular actions that are “multidimensional” in nature (Grimes

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<sup>75</sup> Netton is the Sharjah Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter, where he specializes in classical Arab and Islamic history, Islamic theology and philosophy, Sufism, medieval Arab travellers, Arabic and Islamic bibliography, Islamic art and more. He is the author and editor of twenty-one books. Recent publications include *Islam, Christianity and Tradition: A Comparative Exploration* (2006) and *Islam, Christianity and the Mystical Journey: A Comparative Exploration* (2011). He is also the General Editor of *The British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* and is a member of the research cluster for Islamic studies in the institute.

1999). This multidimensionality means that rituals “surge and subside, ebb and flow” as places change and become created and recreated (Grimes 1982, 542). The latter trend is pertinent to detail in the current study because this multidimensionality helps map an institution from one locality to another. Therefore, my documenting of ritual and space is not for the sake of defining good and bad ritual or sacred and profane place, but rather to use space and ritual, and the meanings given to it by diverse adherents, to engage with Sufism as a dynamic tradition. For this reason in this current study rituals are dependent on places and actions and interpretations given by different adherents to Bawa’s places, both individually and collectively.

In this chapter I describe rituals that take place in the larger Fellowship complex, such as the *mawlid* (birthday) celebrations of the Prophet Muhammad and Abdul Qadir Jilani and meetings and anniversaries that are orientated towards Bawa’s life. I provide ethnographic experiences of the commemorations based on Bawa’s life and his teachings, such as his death anniversary (*urs*). I conclude by suggesting that one needs to understand all the spaces and rituals in relation to each other. It is when these spaces and activities, and subsequently all the participants, are taken as a collective, does one begin to apprehend what this Fellowship is as a lived community.

## **The Beginning of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship**

### *Sufi Centers of Activities and Shrine Cultures*

Historically Sufi spaces developed according to their local and cultural contexts, however these institutions shared similarities in their purpose and function. The Sufi master around whom a community formed was a teacher, educator and leader of the group. In Turkish Sufi

tradition, for instance, the *tekke* (hospice or lodge) was the name given to the buildings in which Sufi brotherhoods would gather, while *khanqah* (lodging place) is the Persian equivalent of a similar institution. The Arabic *zawiyyah* refers to a Sufi lodge, while a *ribat* was initially understood as a “fortress located at a sensitive point along the Islamic frontier, garrisoned by pious individuals” along the North African coast (Mortel 1998, 29).<sup>76</sup> Over time it came to be understood as a resting place for travellers and those in need. It was also associated with Sufi Orders, while being funded by Muslim leaders (Mortel 1998, 29).

Dating back as early as the ninth to fourteenth centuries, lodges of Sufi teachers usually included a mausoleum for the order’s teacher(s), a *masjid* (mosque), a space for religious education (i.e., Qur’anic recitation), a residential space for the *shaykh* and his family, along with students and visitors, who usually performed duty as a way of payment to reside in the hospice (Böwering and Melvin-Koushki 2012). These became culturally and locally representative of Islam proper, as is seen in the historical context of South Asia. The originally Persian *dargah* (shrine) became a common feature in the Sufi landscape of South Asia, where similar buildings or institutions developed around Sufi *shaykhs* and their subsequent entombment. In South Asia, the *dargah* became a central institution for Sufism and Islam and also a site for religious pluralism, especially as many visited tombs of Sufi saints across the Muslim world and beyond it. These spaces then were not only centers through and in which Islam proliferated, but were also sites for inter and intra-religious dialogue, while in regions

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<sup>76</sup> For more on *ribat* please see “Ribats in Mecca during the Medieval Period: a Descriptive Study Based on Literary Sources” by Richard T. Mortel (*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, Vol. 61, No. 1 (1998), pp. 29-50).

such as South Asia it included Hindus and Sikhs.<sup>77</sup> In the South Asian context it is the role of women in shrines that is the most notable.<sup>78</sup>

Shrine spaces were the site in which gatherings centered on a Sufi teacher and her/his community of followers. Activities that unfold in a shrine include prayers, communal religious gatherings and classes. Shrines, which were part of larger complexes, also provided accommodation to travellers and the service of free food. These shrine spaces are considered to be an extension of the Ka'ba ("cube") and the Great Mosque in Mecca, the most important "shrine complex" in the Muslim world and the center of pilgrimage activity.<sup>79</sup> Shrines and centers that developed around a Sufi teacher and his followers were both sacred and secular in their centrality and purpose. Aside from being the place of residence of the Sufi teacher while alive and ultimately her/his final resting place, activities in relation to her/his life and to Islamic tradition were a continual factor in the purpose that these Sufi centers served.

The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship Headquarters in Philadelphia is Bawa's center of activity. It was initially his home and lodge, wherein devoted disciples resided with him. From this initial purpose, the Fellowship has expanded in its varying purposes. The larger complex that forms the Fellowship serves similar functions to Sufi spaces that developed historically. The Fellowship performs both sacred and secular roles. For instance, not only does it contain the personal items of Bawa, which have transformed the space into a memorial and shrine space, it also serves very basic needs by providing residence for devoted disciples and food to

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<sup>77</sup> Please see Section II, especially Chapter 4 on *Islam in Sri Lanka* and Chapter 8 on *Women and Sufi Shrines* for a discussion of this topic.

<sup>78</sup> This is further explored in detail in Chapter 8 in the subsection *In Search of Women in Sufism*.

<sup>79</sup> For more on this site please see *Mecca: The Sacred City* (2014) by Ziauddin Sardar, *One Thousand Roads to Mecca: Ten Centuries of Travelers Writing about the Muslim Pilgrimage* (1997) edited by Michael Wolfe and *Mecca the Blessed & Medina the Radiant: The Holiest Cities of Islam* (1997) with text by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Photographs by Ali Kazuyoshi.

any visitors. The Fellowship is *multidimensional* in its utility, like Sufi lodges and shrine complexes across time and space.

#### *Bawa's Arrival to America October 1971-1972*

The center of any Sufi space is dependent on the life and activity of its teacher, for it is around him/her that a space develops and institutionalizes. The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship's history is tied to Bawa and his arrival to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1971. The catalyst for Bawa's arrival to Philadelphia was Mohamed Mauroof,<sup>80</sup> a student from Sri Lanka who was completing his graduate studies in the Anthropology Department at the University of Pennsylvania. During this time he was also teaching at Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, known as the first institute for higher learning for African-Americans. He was distraught by the racial rioting taking place in Philadelphia, such as the Columbia Avenue Riots in 1964 in north Philadelphia.<sup>81</sup> Mauroof felt that Bawa could quell much of this racial unrest with his message of peace and unity. As a result African-American members formed an early contingency of the Fellowship, even more so because Bawa was a dark-skinned man.

Another important thread to this narrative is the story of Carolyn Andrews, who remains the current Executive Secretary of the Fellowship. Mauroof and Andrews met in 1968 through

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<sup>80</sup> Mauroof's dissertation, which he completed in the Anthropology Department at the University of Pennsylvania, was on Bawa Muhaiyaddeen and the early years of the Fellowship, is entitled *The Culture and Experience of Luminous and Liminal Komunesam* (1976). See Chapter 1's subsection on *Scholarship on the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship* for more on Mauroof.

<sup>81</sup> The Philadelphia race riot or the "Columbia Avenue Riots" unfolded due to an incident that took place on August 28th, 1964 in north Philadelphia, when the city's police responded to a call at the home of an African-American couple, over a domestic issue. Rumours immediately surged that the police were assaulting a "pregnant black woman" which attracted a crowd and led to attacks on the police (Lyons 2010; Maurantonio 2012). The rioting took place for days, and included looting, hundreds of injuries and millions of dollars in damage, while the cause of the civil rights and black militancy came to a head. For more on this please see the online archival collections of Temple University Libraries entitled *Civil Rights in a Northern City: Philadelphia*, found on <http://northerncity.library.temple.edu/content/collections/columbia-avenue-riots/what-interpretative-essay> (Accessed May 5, 2015).

a co-op in Philadelphia, and connected through their shared interests in vegetarianism (Mauroof 1976, 58). Andrews had a peculiar mystical experience early on in life when all things “disappeared” and there was an absence of light, sound, smell, touch and body and she came to recognize a reality of oneness.<sup>82</sup> She struggled with this occurrence for years and it was through the assistance of Mauroof that Andrews started writing letters to Bawa. In his letters to Andrews, Bawa interpreted her mystical experience and this exchange confirmed Bawa’s spiritual prowess for Andrews. She wanted to visit Bawa in Sri Lanka but did not have the financial resources to do so, and so mobilized with Mauroof to bring Bawa to North America.

Mauroof initially approached the Moorish Science Temple to sponsor Bawa’s visit to America. After they consulted with their headquarters in Chicago they declined the proposal but they suggested that Mauroof contact the Dembys. Robert F. Demby served in the Korean War and would take the name Khwaja Muhaiyaddeen after becoming a disciple of Bawa. He was one of the first Senior Presidents of the Fellowship. Demby and his wife Virginia were leading a yoga group in Philadelphia at the time. This yoga group was significant as many from this group transferred over to the Fellowship. For instance, Zoharah Simmons<sup>83</sup> was taking a yoga class taught by Virginia Demby.<sup>84</sup> At the end of one yoga class, Mauroof visited and spoke to the students about Bawa and sought signatures to procure a visa for Bawa’s visit to America. He brought with him photographs of Bawa, along with some pamphlets of

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<sup>82</sup> Carolyn Fatima Andrews or “Secretary” as she is commonly known relays some of her experiences in the “Introduction” to *The Tree that fell to the West* (2003) pp. xi-xv.

<sup>83</sup> Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons is an Assistant Professor of Religion and is affiliated in the Women Studies Department at the University of Florida. Simmons’ area of study is on *shari‘a* and its impact on Muslim women in contemporary contexts and her dissertation research focused on the Middle East, specifically Jordan, Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. She teaches Islam, Women, Religion and Society; Women and Islam, African American Religious Traditions, and Race, Religion, & Rebellion.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with author, via Skype, May 16, 2014.

Bawa's teachings in English. Some of the students in the yoga class, including Simmons, signed the papers to help Mauroof get a visa for Bawa.<sup>85</sup> With the efforts of Mauroof and Andrews, along with the signatures of the early members, such as the Dembys and Simmons, Mauroof was able to procure a visa for Bawa to visit the United States and formed the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship prior to his arrival. Bawa arrived in Philadelphia on October 11, 1971. Simmons, and her young daughter were among the estimated dozen visitors who went to the airport to greet Bawa during his first visit to America.<sup>86</sup> From the airport they all went to Mauroof's home on 254 South 46<sup>th</sup> Street in West Philadelphia and that night was the first time that Bawa discoursed in Philadelphia.

In the earliest days it was mostly locals from the neighbourhood who attended Bawa's talks and they included many members from the African-American community in Philadelphia. For instance, Khair un-Nisa, an African-American Muslim female disciple of Bawa, explained that her mother who used to work at a recreation center in West Philadelphia was approached by Khwaja Muhaiyaddeen (Robert Demby) to use the recreation center to host a discourse by Bawa.<sup>87</sup> Posters of Bawa were displayed at the local cooperative shops and grocery stores. At the time Bawa was advertised as a "mystical guru" here to help the "the poor, the African American, the downtrodden."<sup>88</sup> When Khair un-Nisa went to visit Bawa with one of her friends soon after he arrived in 1971, she noted right away that most of the

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<sup>85</sup> Interview with author, via Skype, May 16, 2014.

<sup>86</sup> Mauroof notes that there were twenty-one members who went to visit Bawa at the airport, nine who were regular members of the group that was established for Bawa and the remaining were companions of the nine (1976, 71). Mauroof also dates Bawa's arrival to August 11th, 1971 while everyone whom I have spoken with has dated his arrival to October 11th, 1971. It is possible that Mauroof did this for anonymity for his dissertation, since pseudonyms were used for names and places in his study. He also writes that three interested members were corresponding to Bawa via mail prior to his arrival.

<sup>87</sup> Khair un-Nisa, Interview with author, Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 18, 2014.

<sup>88</sup> Khair un-Nisa, Interview with author, Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 18, 2014.



visitors were African-Americans. Many were also from the Moorish Science Temple, notable because of the fez caps.<sup>89</sup>

By this time, there was a main center in the city of Philadelphia, and then a branch in the suburbs. In order to accommodate the growing number of visitors and also so as not to disturb Mauroof, who was lecturing and completing his dissertation at the time, Bawa moved to a new house in January of 1972.<sup>90</sup> This shift changed the demographic of the group according to Mauroof. By March of the same year meetings began to attract nearly a hundred plus regularly, sometimes even two hundred, while paid-membership had increased as well (Mauroof 1976, 71). The Fellowship did not move into its current location until the end of 1973. Mauroof presents a different community and its people, at a time when the *masjid* was not constructed. He writes:

[T]here was a large number of ‘youngsters’ (under 30) in this group, but there were also many people who were older. The ‘regulars’ now came from the city as well from the suburbs of about 30-mile radius around the city. Many out-of-towners found places to live in the city so that they could attend the meetings regularly. There was always a slightly larger number of women than men. Among those who became actively involved in the organization there were those who had previously belonged to Catholic, Hindu, Islamic, Jewish and Protestant faiths (Mauroof 1976, 70).

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<sup>89</sup> Mauroof gave pseudonyms to his sites, so it is unclear the exact localities he is referring to. He notes though that even in this early period many were visiting from as far north as Montreal to as far west as San Francisco, Kansas City and Chicago (1976, 70). From early January 1972, many of the visitors were locals from the neighbourhood (i.e., African-Americans) but “the congregation changed colour” (1976, 70).

<sup>90</sup> In his dissertation he suggests other personal reasons, some due to tensions and “attendant scandal, gossip etc.” being reason that he had to remove himself from this community. His decision to write an analytical account of the community did result in souring relationships, not only with the group members but also with Bawa (1976, 13-15). I was not able to connect with Mauroof for this project, in fact I am not sure if he is still alive, and so I am not unable to confirm these events from his perspective beyond conjecturing from his dissertation.

Mauroof also distinguishes between “regular members” (those who were heavily involved in the life of the early Fellowship and performed tasks such as publishing, etc.) and “interested members”, who were not actively engaged, but were key to publicizing about Bawa via word of mouth and would visit occasionally. In the first few months of Bawa’s arrival to America, Mauroof counted twenty-eight regular members and sixty-nine interested members (1976, 71).

Bawa’s teachings and songs began to be translated into English immediately once he had arrived in Philadelphia. They were recorded on audio and film footage, which are all stored in the Fellowship archives. Books of his discourses were published, initially in the form of pamphlets.<sup>91</sup> During the evenings of the meetings, which were held four times a week, there were an estimate of around sixty people who came to hear Bawa discourse regularly in the first year of his stay in Philadelphia (Mauroof 1976, 71). The tradition of meetings held by Bawa continued when he left for the first time to Sri Lanka. Mauroof notes that even at this early stage, when recorded discourses were played or read, there were already disagreements over interpretations of what Bawa’s teachings meant (Mauroof 1976, 262).

Despite these disagreements over interpretations, Mauroof felt that the “unity was based on everybody’s belief in Bawa whom they had all seen and accepted. That is why it is possible to surmise that Bawa represented to them, in visible form, something that each of the individuals had believed in all the time— even before they had met Bawa” (Mauroof 1976, 263). These conclusions made by Mauroof, based on participant observation of the first two years of Bawa’s stay in America, are not far different from current tendencies as I encountered

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<sup>91</sup> Mauroof writes that from October 1971 to December 1972, two books were published, 300 copies of one and 500 copies of another. Students of Bawa also appeared on television, radio and newspapers leading to a wider audience (1976, 79). In the early days the first translators were native Tamil speakers and included Mauroof, Dr. M. Z Markar, Dr. Ajwad Macan-Markar, Fuard Uduman, Rajis Ganesan and Dr. Ganesan. Crisi Baye, an American student who keenly studied Tamil to communicate with Bawa without a mediator, was reputedly tapped by Bawa on her head and miraculously was able to comprehend Tamil. She was also a regular translator.

them. Even in my encounter of the Fellowship, it appears that those who are “regular members” remain relatively smaller in numbers and far more active in everyday life of the Fellowship in comparison to the “interested members.” The differing interpretations of Bawa’s teachings that began in Bawa’s lifetime continue to be a pervasive point of anxiety for a Fellowship without a living *shaykh*. This is most evident in the practices and rituals found in the Fellowship, both as Bawa instituted them and as they continue to unfold today.

### *Early Practices in the Fellowship*

In the earliest days in Philadelphia, Bawa taught silent *dhikr* (remembrance of Allah).<sup>92</sup> His initial disciples remember Bawa’s *dhikr* instructions of repetition of *la illaha illa llah* (there is no god but God), which he paralleled to the Tamil statement *unni tavira verru onrum illai* (except for you, there is nothing). His *dhikr* discourses were meticulous, as they detailed inhalation of breaths and movements from the toe of one’s foot through the “4448 nerves and vessels and also the pore of the skin” that vibrate with the sound of Allahu, while it rises to the top of the head, which Bawa explained was the *arsh* (throne of Allah) (Muhaiyaddeen April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1974).

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<sup>92</sup> The practice of *dhikr*, or the remembrance of Allah through the recitation of Allah’s Names, is an effort to achieve ultimate union with God or to annihilate one’s ego. Bawa’s explanation of the Names of Allah is found in the *Asma’ul Husna: the 99 Beautiful Names of Allah* (1979). The Professor of Islamic Studies William Chittick refers to this ability to comprehend the Names of God and the names’ corresponding essence (*dhat*) as the “distinguishing feature of man” (2005, 62). To remember the true reality of the existence of the human being is to know that “God cannot be understood apart from the object that it reflects” (Chittick 2000, 8). This process of actualizing and remembering the human potential for perfection requires the assistance of God and the exemplars who have achieved this perfection are the prophets and the saints.

To some students he gave the instruction of the *kalimah* or the word. This *kalimah* was the repetition *la illaha illa llah*.<sup>93</sup> For instance, Farida Nur Parker was born into a Catholic family and was one of the members of the Demby's yoga group. Once the Dembys stopped the yoga group, Farida inquired as to their whereabouts and decided to go visit the Fellowship. She visited hesitantly as she was studying yoga with a Hindu teacher and did not want to "guru hop." Eventually her experiences of Bawa and his teachings confirmed that she was to be a part of the Fellowship. Still she had her yoga teacher's mantra in her mind. So Bawa invited her to receive the *kalimah* (word).<sup>94</sup> Farida explained her experience of this "initiation":

I just remember he had me recite *la illaha illa llah* [there is no god, but God]. And the mantra completely went out of my head and then the mantra, the new mantra so to speak *la illaha illa llah*, and he took his thumb and put his hand here and wrote on my forehead. I later came to understand that the *nasib* [destiny] is written with the *qalam*, *qalam* [pen] it's called, the pen of destiny that even the angel that brings it doesn't know what it will write and the pen itself doesn't know what it will write. And Bawa said that its *nasib* [destiny] which Allah alone knows. And it can only be changed by a divinely wise guru and I thought he has changed my destiny by writing there. I don't know what he wrote. Some people say that it was the *kalimah* [word] but that's what I was given.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Bawa also taught the third *kalimah* (Glory be to Allah and Praise to Allah, and there is no God but Allah, and Allah is the Greatest. And there is no Might or Power except with Allah), which is included in the *dhikr* recitation, while he usually handed out the first *kalimah* (There is no God but Allah).

<sup>94</sup> *Kalimah* (plural *kalimat*, and *kalim*) means a word, a command while in reference to the Prophet Muhammad it may also mean revelation. In ritual contexts, *kalimah* usually signifies specific sayings or affirmations repeated by a Muslim. For instance, the attesting that "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his Messenger" is referred to as the *Kalimah Tayyibah* or the attestation of faith.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with author, at her home. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 14, 2014.

Mauroof also documents such similar practices of the handing out of the *kalimah* as the only form of “initiation” that was ever practiced by Bawa (Mauroof 1976, 295). These practices usually took place in private or in smaller groups.

Initially, silent *dhikr* instruction was the core of Bawa’s early meditative instruction. Eventually, the movement of the teaching of *dhikr* from silent to out loud, I was told by many, was introduced because the American disciples struggled with silent *dhikr* in the early hours of dawn. This out loud *dhikr*, which manifested in variations of litanies, in due course was “standardized.” Bawa also handed out *duas* (supplicatory prayers)<sup>96</sup> in Arabic or protective amulets<sup>97</sup> (Mauroof 1976, 296).

#### *Institutional Developments and the Making of a Transnational Movement: 1972-1984*

During Bawa’s first trip back to Sri Lanka from Philadelphia in June of 1972, thirteen American disciples returned with him, while another twenty-eight students visited during the duration of Bawa’s stay (Mauroof 1976, 71). When he returned to Philadelphia from his first trip back to Sri Lanka, Bawa recommended that a new house be purchased. This resulted in the acquiring of a former Jewish meeting centre on Overbrook Road in late 1973. The Fellowship House on Overbrook Road became the home of Bawa and the Headquarters for the Fellowship and the institution that was formed to contain the teachings of Bawa.

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<sup>96</sup> Supplicatory prayers in Islam or *dua* are completed for personal and additional appeals. It may be added after regular prayers (*salat*). Usually, those who are completing *duas* kneel and hold their open palms out facing up. *Duas* attributed to the Prophet Muhammad or other saintly figures are also completed.

<sup>97</sup> The use of protective amulets in Islam is found amongst many Muslims, and is culturally dependent. One common amulet often found is of the five holy persons associated with the Prophet Muhammad, which includes his daughter Fatima, and son-in-law and cousin, Ali and his grandsons Hasan and Husayn. Amulets shaped like a hand with five fingers capture this holy family. Others also include specific Qur’anic verses, or names along with numerologies as developed by the maker of the amulet, who may be a Sufi teacher. Protective amulets are used for protective or curative purposes. Amulets also serve decorative purposes as well.

Speaking tours were arranged for Bawa, especially with radio and television programs and at universities. For instance, Mitchell Gilbert, a radio personality and a popular disc jockey in Philadelphia, used to advertise Bawa's teachings, along with meeting times at the Fellowship for all to visit.<sup>98</sup> Similarly Lex Hixon, later known as the Sufi *shaykh* Nur al-Anwar al-Jerrahi (d. 1995), had a radio program called *In the Spirit*, which ran on WBAI in New York City from 1972 to 1989.<sup>99</sup> Along with speaking on Hixon's radio program, Bawa's students arranged numerous speaking engagements across the United States, which included regular trips to San Francisco, New York, Iowa, California, Boston (Harvard University) and Toronto (University of Toronto and York University).

Students from nearby universities also came to visit, such as from St. Joseph's University and Villanova. Visitors were not limited to those from North America, as students visited from Europe as well. Jeane Krause is one such devotee. Krause grew up in America and moved to Finland, but she returned to the United States in order to seek spirituality. While visiting Philadelphia, a friend informed her about Bawa, and so she went to visit him at his home on Overbrook Road. From then on, Krause regularly visited Bawa from Finland, not only in Philadelphia but also in Sri Lanka. These speaking tours and guest appearances on radio shows, along with press attention, helped spread Bawa's message and attracted students from many different parts of the United States and Canada.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Gilbert's *One Light: An Owner's Manual for the Human Being* (2005) is a memoir of his experiences with Bawa and his teachings. The book has an introduction by Bawa and also includes some of the radio commentaries, provided by his wife, Sonia Gilbert, who is one of the current Executive members of the Fellowship.

<sup>99</sup> Hixon interviewed many spiritual and religious personalities from different religious and spiritual traditions and Guru Bawa was a regular guest on this show from 1973 to 1978. Hixon eventually became a student of *shaykh* Muzaffer Ozak (d. 1985), who was another regular guest on his radio show. He became a *shaykh* in the Sufi tradition of the Jerrahis and co-founded the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Sufi Order in New York. For more see *Living Sufism in North America: Between Tradition and Transformation* by William Rory Dickson (2015).

<sup>100</sup> Mauroof lists smaller branches in the suburbs of Philadelphia, along with "four branches in northeastern U.S, three in a major city, and one in a rural community in upstate New York; there is also a highly active branch in

These visits to different American cities or to the homes of interested disciples resulted in the establishment of smaller branches, which would subsequently meet and listen to Bawa's discourses. Some of these branches have included Boston and Stamford, Connecticut, New York (formerly the Woodstock Branch), Iowa, Wisconsin, California (with members from San Francisco and Los Angeles) and Toronto Branch in Canada.<sup>101</sup> These speaking tours diversified Bawa's followers. The initial African-American visitors and some spiritual seekers slowly transitioned towards a predominately Judeo-Christian American audience, with inclinations towards spiritualities and mysticism.

Many of the early African-Americans were unable to cope with the growing presence of Euro-Americans in the movement. Philadelphia was still reeling from the riots of 1964 and this was one of the reasons that Mauroof invited Bawa to America, as mentioned above. Some of these members were affiliated with Black Nationalist movements, which created racial tensions within the Fellowship. As a result of this most slowly left the community, though some remained, such as the Dembys, who maintained significant leadership positions. Mauroof highlights racial dynamics as evident upon Bawa's departure to Sri Lanka from Philadelphia for the first time (1976, 302). Simmons explained to me more about these early racial dynamics:

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Chicago, and Toronto, and Vancouver, Canada," equaling seven hundred members in all (1976, 71). During my fieldwork in April 2014, I was told meetings in New York City have started again on a bi-weekly basis on Thursday evenings.

<sup>101</sup> This study is unable to map and detail the development of all of these individual branches and I hope future scholarship can capture these institutional establishments and their history further. Since it was the members of the Boston and Toronto Branch that I engaged in addition to Philadelphia, I can provide some initial details of these two branches. The Boston Branch was formed when Bawa visited Boston on November 10, 1979 for a one-day visit. During this time, he discoursed and stayed with Dave and Carol McNitt in West Netwon and also gave one public talk at Harvard Science Center. It was at the home of the McNitt's that he made a small branch that would become the Boston Branch. The Toronto Branch was officially incorporated on June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1976, again with a visit by Bawa to Toronto, though Bawa visited a year prior to this before the official incorporation of the Toronto Branch. I am grateful to the Boston Branch President John Barnett for providing details about the Boston Branch.

Bawa would come down from his bedroom, and just sort of seemingly do some alchemical, invisible stuff to calm the [...] animosity. But people would actually be shoving because you know, maybe some of the real Black Nationalists types, the Nation of Islam types, they didn't want a white person sitting next to them or touching them. "Don't touch my child" you know, it was you know "you devils" and this kind of vibration and speech [...]. But what happened basically was that the [...] most of the black people left, and never came back. So, over time it then became predominantly white. And there were those of us who were there from day one [...]. I remember saying this to somebody who was getting on me saying [...] "are you still going there with all those white people?" And I said look, there can be lions and tigers in there and if Bawa could keep them from eating me, I would still be there.<sup>102</sup>

This further signal to a critical facet of race and class in the role of Fellowship, dynamics that become further diversified with the arrival of a predominately South Asian Muslim and Middle Eastern immigrant population after Bawa's death. Bawa also spoke with many different religious and spiritual groups, including the Jerrahis, the students of Muzzafer Ozak (d. 1985).<sup>103</sup> He spoke to students of Georges Ivanovitch Gurdieff (d. 1949)<sup>104</sup> and Swami Muktananda (d. 1982).<sup>105</sup> The 1970s in particular saw the arrival of many wisdom teachers or

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<sup>102</sup> Interview with author, via Skype, May 16, 2014.

<sup>103</sup> For more on Ozak see Chapter 1's subsection on *Hazrat Inayat Khan*.

<sup>104</sup> Georges Ivanovitch Gurdieff's (d. 1949) search for wisdom brought him to different traditions of Central Asia and Tibet and the creation of way he called the "Fourth Way." Dickson writes "Gurdjieff's experimental approach would have had a distinct appeal to increasingly science-orientated Europeans and North Americans in the early twentieth century" (2012, 79). He would also incorporate music into his spiritual practices, while his publications of various titles would be popular for those interested in spirituality and Sufism. For more on Gurdjieff please see his books *Is there "Life" on Earth? An Introduction to Gurdjieff* (1973) or Gurdjieff's writings such as *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson: An Objectively Impartial Criticism of the Life of Man* (1990 [1950]).

<sup>105</sup> Swami Muktananda (Siddha Yoga) was an Indian guru who was part of the broader trend of Hindu-inspired gurus in the United States. He later became known for his charlatanism and abuses of power.



“gurus” from the “East”. It was because of the proliferation of “gurus” who were common across the United States, some of who were associated with charlatanism, that the title “guru” was dropped from “Guru Bawa.”

Bawa also caught the attention of various news print outlets, such as *the Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Pittsburg Press*, during the height of the Iranian hostage crisis when he was in Philadelphia. During 1978-1980 Bawa began a letter writing campaign to Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini, Prime Minister of Israel Menachem Begin, Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat and President of the United States Jimmy Carter. Distraught by the distortion of Islam as represented through the political crisis with Iran and America, Bawa provided a “chronological history of Jerusalem” (Muhaiyaddeen 1987, 12-19). He reminded the recipients of the letters that Islam was about peace and unity, not violence and disunity. It was this letter writing campaign that featured Bawa in *Time Magazine* in 1980 and resulted in the book publication by the Fellowship Press, *Islam and World Peace: Explanations of a Sufi* (1987), which Bawa insisted needed to be published for those in the West.

During these meetings and tours Bawa regularly discoursed and took questions from those who visited him, either in terms of helping to solve personal matters (i.e., marital or health related) or answering broader philosophical questions. Bawa told stories of various prophetic figures from the Abrahamic traditions while also sharing stories of Hindu *puranas* and *vedas* (Hindu texts). All these stories were a means to speak about his message of the one God and the human being’s relationship with God, which is often summed up as “man-God, God-man.”<sup>106</sup> Next to discoursing, Bawa also sang. These songs were in praise of God, whom

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<sup>106</sup> The topic of *al-Insan Kamil* is further discussed in Chapter 7.

he referred to in Arabic as Allah and in Tamil as *Andavan*, *Kadavul* and *Devam*.<sup>107</sup> Bawa was also a painter and produced many paintings that are all found in the Fellowship in Philadelphia but also in homes of most of the Fellowship disciples.<sup>108</sup>

Bawa's final trip to Sri Lanka was in December 1980 and he returned to Philadelphia in November 1982. 1982 was a formative period in Sri Lanka, as it marks the beginning of rioting that led up to the Eelam Wars, or civil wars, in Sri Lanka.<sup>109</sup> Jaffna, where Bawa's first institutions were formed was under difficult circumstances and it was no longer safe to travel between Colombo and Jaffna.<sup>110</sup> In spite of these broader political and ethno-religious situations across the island, the members of the Fellowship who remained in Colombo with Bawa were experiencing their own transformative moment that led to the construction of Bawa's final project in Philadelphia, his *masjid* (mosque).

*From 1984 to 1986: The Building of the Masjid and the Passing of Bawa*<sup>111</sup>

Maryam Kabeer Faye<sup>112</sup> was already a practicing Muslim when she met Bawa. As she relayed during our interview, she was part of the group who was with Bawa in Colombo during his

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<sup>107</sup> They would be sung in Tamil so spontaneously that sometimes translators were not always present to translate. Many of Bawa's recorded songs till today still have no English translations accompanying them

<sup>108</sup> These include his rendition of the *Asma'ul Husna* (the 99 Names of Allah), *The Tree of the Prophets*, *Rocky Mountain of the Heart*, *The Inner Heart*, *Four Steps to Pure Iman* and a painting of Moinuddin Chishti's *mazar* in Ajmer. For more on these paintings please see Gisela Webb's "Teaching through Pictures: Three Paintings of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen" pp. 290-296 in *Windows on the House of Islam: Muslim Sources on Spirituality and Religious Life* edited by John Renard (California: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>109</sup> Please see Chapter 4 section on *Independence and Eelam Wars*, where this is discussed further.

<sup>110</sup> Please see Chapter 5 and 6 on these Sri Lankan sites of Bawa.

<sup>111</sup> I do not enter into a discussion of the particularities of the white convert community members of the Fellowship, though this forms a small contingency of members in the Fellowship. Further study of converts to Islam in the Fellowship would be valuable to explore, especially in light of studies of convert Muslims in America. Zareena Grewal's study *Islam Is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority* (2013), highlights that Sufi Islam has drawn especially Euro-American female Muslim converts (222); whether this is the case in the Fellowship has yet to be determined.

<sup>112</sup> Maryam Kabeer Faye in her autobiography, *Journey through Ten Thousand Veils* (2009), narrates her meetings and studies with many different mystical teachers and gurus, which culminated in Philadelphia with Bawa

final visit to Sri Lanka. Maryam Kabeer explained that during her visit to Sri Lanka, she asked Bawa for permission her to complete her *salat* (prayers). At this moment, *salat* did not take place as a communal activity in the Serendib Sufi Study Circle in Colombo. According to Maryam Kabeer, Bawa said she could. The female American disciples of Bawa who were present, were intrigued by Maryam Kabeer completing *salat* and asked Bawa if they should also complete the prayers. Bawa said they could. When Maryam Kabeer who led the prayers and the others who began practicing *salat* in Sri Lanka returned to Philadelphia, this practice continued. Some of the members began to take part in this prayer, in addition to *dhikr* meditation that was taking place regularly already. For instance, Simmons recounts the first time she saw *salat* performed at the Fellowship:

So I remember going into Overbrook Avenue and seeing people making *salat*, and I said “what are they doing” to somebody who was sitting there, not up there doing *salat* with them. And they said “they’re making *salat*” and I said “well what’s *salat*?” And they said “those are the Muslim prayers.” And I said “why are they doing it?” They said “I don’t know.” So you know, it was kind of like, slowly beginning to dawn on me that you know some people were very interested in associating with the Islamic tradition, and believing that there was no way to be in the Sufi, on a Sufi path, unless you were Muslim. So I didn’t necessarily agree with that, but I was looking and observing. And then if Bawa

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Muhaiyaddeen. She would go on to marry Ahamed Kabeer, one of the imams of the Fellowship *masjid* and then later divorce him. With the passing of Bawa she continued to encounter other Sufi *tariqas* and she has now become a *shaykha* in the *Tariqa Mustafawiyya* and her home serves as a *zawiyya* or lodge in Philadelphia, which is located near the Fellowship. *Tariqa Mustafawiyya* based on the lineage of *shaykh* Harun al-Faqir, the eldest grandson of *shaykh* Samba Gueye Haydar and a nephew to *shaykh* Mustafa Gueye Haydar (d. 1989) or Imamul Awliya. This *tariqa* developed in Senegal. For more on this group please see the community website: <http://webzoom.freewebs.com/taraqatulmustafawiiyyu/> (Accessed March 13, 2015). I focus on Maryam Kabir in Chapter 8 in my discussion of women and the Fellowship; please see that chapter for more.

told me to do something, there was no way I wasn't going to do it because by that time you know my faith in him was complete. But I was concerned because like many people in the West, you know I've heard very negative things about Islam, particularly as it related to women.<sup>113</sup>

The beginning of the keeping of the Muslim prayers led to the start of the construction of the *masjid* as part of the Fellowship. The mosque was constructed as an addition to the Fellowship House. Despite his fading health, the construction of the mosque was directed entirely by Bawa. The building project led and commissioned by Bawa and completed by the volunteer work of some members of the Fellowship, signals to a seminal moment in the North American history of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. Those who were part of the building of the *masjid*, such as Sarah, speak about the experience:

It was just amazing. From the very beginning because we had Bawa leading us and of course there was, you know, people who were knowledgeable in construction. But we were all of the workers, the labourers. Everyone in the Fellowship became a labourer in the building of this. It was a labour of love in building this mosque. And the very first, you know, there was some people who really had a hard time with that.<sup>114</sup>

This “labour of love” was also riddled with internal challenges for some members who were struggling to associate with the religion, which Sarah goes on to describe:

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<sup>113</sup> Interview with author, via Skype. Toronto, Canada. May 16, 2014.

<sup>114</sup> This member of the Fellowship requested to be anonymous and so I have used the pseudonym Sarah. The interview was completed in the Fellowship classroom, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 2, 2014.

Sarah: It was difficult because this was going to be an outer establishment of a religion to those people. Even though Bawa had given us this very esoteric and more mystical explanation of what Islam was, building an actual mosque represented to them and they said now people won't come to the Fellowship because people will think we're exclusively Islamic.<sup>115</sup> But this was Bawa's intention to build this mosque.

S: Did Bawa talk to those people and try to address their concerns?

Sarah: Yes he did, he addressed and you can read those questions and answers to it as well.<sup>116</sup> There's lot of them. And so then Bawa at this one point just very suddenly he, they had cleared the area and he said and outlined the foundation line. He said bring me a brick one morning and he said call the executives and tell them I'm having a brick laying ceremony. Very casually the way he did that. So [...] we had this brick brought up to his room and he became very, very serious and went into this like sort of state of meditation and he had [...]. And some people were there, not a large group of people. And he said alright now every one of you should say *bismillah ar rahman ar rahim* [in the name of God the most compassionate, most merciful] and say a prayer over this brick and he had the brick passed around to every single person in the room and it was a rainy day and Bawa wasn't really well enough to go outside himself but they had a camera down there

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<sup>115</sup> If one looks to the list of archived discourses for 1984, especially from April onwards (the *masjid* was opened in May), much of Bawa's discourses are on topics such as prayer in Islam (April 17, 1984), congregational prayers (April 17, 1984) and the mosque as God's house (May 1, 1984). This is in keeping with Sarah's comments that Bawa was discussing the purpose of the *masjid* project, as it was being constructed.

<sup>116</sup> Some of these question and answer discourses are found in Bawa's talk to Executive Committee members (March 3, 1984; May 1, 1984). The call to prayer and opening comments, along with Bawa's opening discourses entitled "This Is Paradise" along with two sons "Man's Life Is a Dream" and "With *Iman* Lets Search for the Treasure of the Heart" (May 27, 1984), address these questions. These are on some of the discourses that I use in this chapter on this topic.

so he was viewing it on his TV in the room and he had Chuck and some Sri Lankans were here Gnaniar and these people. And they had dug the corner stone which is right outside of here actually, in this corner I believe right here. This corner. It is also this place that they designated as the *qiblah* [direction of prayer].

[...continues].

[S]o Bawa sat in absolute silence and deep meditation while that ceremony was taking place. And you just knew that it was very significant what was happening. And that it was something much greater than just a physical foundation being laid for this, it was something Bawa was bringing to us here in a very high spiritual level. So that brick was laid and then began this whole process of this building of this mosque. And so everyday you know these, every volunteers would gather and we started clearing the ground and laying gravel and people, the Chuck Ginty was sort of the contractor, foreman for the whole group and he and a few people, they would go up every morning and meet with Bawa and find out what he wanted them to accomplish that day. And then start these things and then more and more people got involved so that in the end, I think, everybody participated in some way on some day. And I used to love to come over there and help between being in Bawa's room or when Bawa would take a nap or something I'd come over and try to just do, you know, be part of it. Because it was so amazing and such so much joy in it. And then Bawa would sit on that second floor landing and with a walkie-talkie and he'd look down and he would talk to people from there or after, you know.

During the day at different points you know he would sit there and watch and so I think it was the whole thing was completed within six months.<sup>117</sup>

Bawa's own understanding of the *masjid* was that it was "God's House." In a discourse entitled "Talk to Executive Committee: As One Family, Look for the Truth. This is God's House" given on May 1, 1984, Bawa explains:

This is a house, Fellowship House, and that is God's House. Now, we have two houses, God's House and Country House. Now we look at it like a people's house. We are looking at it as a people's house. Wisdom's mother, wisdom's children, wisdom's son, wisdom's brothers; what should you see? As mother and father, those duties to the God's House or the Fellowship House, you must do your duties as mothers and fathers' of wisdom. Tell them what needs to be done. Tell them to do your duty. Suppose we form a committee of five or ten people, but the major society is here, in the Fellowship. This is the main, the president and everybody is here. We go look in the same way that a mother and father goes and sees how the children are doing their duty, the main Fellowship should go and cover the duties of the children who are looking after there, just as they are looking after duties here. There should be no difference [...]. People do *dhikr* here. They do the five times prayer there. They do this. But when you go there, you have to

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<sup>117</sup> This member of the Fellowship requested to be anonymous and so I have used the pseudonym Sarah. The interview was completed in the Fellowship classroom, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 2, 2014.

take off your shoes, your slippers, do you ablutions, wash your hands, legs and face, and go up. And then do the duties that you can do there.<sup>118</sup>

Suggested in Bawa's discourse given to the executive members of the Fellowship is that concurrent spaces of the Fellowship already co-existed by 1984. At a time of serious confusion about the religious outlook of the Fellowship, Bawa meticulously fostered diversity and by the time of his death in 1986, it appeared that he ministered specifically to the two parallel communities in North America.

In the discourse above, there is a presentation of the Fellowship as the main center of the institution beyond God's House, since the president and executive members were established in the Fellowship House. It was still the members of the Fellowship who were supposed to be caretakers of "God's House" but not necessarily bound or limited by it. If they wanted to, they could go and pray in "God's House" with of course some prerequisites prior to entering it (i.e., ablutions, dress code etc.), but in the same discourse Bawa adds further:

You cannot beat someone into that place of prayer or through anger or compulsion. If each one wants to go with a willing heart, then they can go. Those who want to do *dhikr*, they can do *dhikr*. Those who want to do *salat*, they can do *salat*. Those who want to study, they can study. Wherever you want to go, there is a *palli* [mosque] here, there is synagogue there, there is a church there. If not, let's sit here and learn the *dhikr* [...]. It is we who have to close the door when we go out [...]. We are the ones who open the door and we are the ones who close the door. It is we who are the ones who open our hearts

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<sup>118</sup> Bawa Muhaiyaddeen discourse, "Talk to Executive Committee: As One Family, Look for the Truth. This is God's House" (May 1, 1984). Translated by Dr. Ganesan. I have gleaned from Dr. Ganesan's translations, but have edited some of his translations into English.



(*qalb*), we are the ones who close the heart (*qalb*) we are the ones who make our heart beautiful. It is not the fault of anyone else outside of us. Whose fault is it? The fault is in us, we are the ones who are responsible. Closing and opening is with us, it is our responsibility. So if we open the door, the fresh air will come, if we close the door, the fresh air cannot come in and breathing will be difficult. [...]. Whatever you can do with a loving heart, do that, whatever you wish to do.<sup>119</sup>

God's House or the *masjid* in Philadelphia was a challenge not only for members of the Fellowship who struggled with the new addition to an already thriving community, but also for those who were outsiders seeking to label Bawa's community. If one wanted to study, pray or recite *dhikr*, then one could choose to do as they pleased but it must come from the site of the *qalb*, the gnostic heart. In explaining this approach, Bawa reminds those in his immediate audience of the nature of their own transformative spiritual paths:

At one time, some children were hippies, at one time some children were Hare Krishnas [...] were you not? In those times, you encountered those places; you did not imagine this place [or state].<sup>120</sup> Now you are thinking in a different way? When the good comes, you think a different way. When evil came you accepted everything that you saw [...]. My precious children, when you go on the path of truth, the world will not accept you. The world will not accept me or will it accept you. The world does not accept what God

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<sup>119</sup> Bawa Muhaiyadeen discourse "Talk to Executive Committee: As One Family, Look for the Truth. This is God's House" (May 1, 1984). Translated by Dr. Ganesan.

<sup>120</sup> Bawa's phrasing of this in Tamil could be understood as him referring to the physical place or to a state of being, I have included both possibilities for the reader.

accepts. But in the world, you have to tread lightly. With the other children, we have to treat them with love.

Bawa's comments here is a reminder to his disciples of the long path they have travelled spiritually, some who were affiliated with the "hippies" and others with the Hare Krishnas, and now with the addition of a new building (God's House and/or *masjid*) many were apprehensive of the Fellowship. Yet for Bawa, it still remains a "path of truth." And for the outsiders who have found this difficult he explains:

They will criticize you. "Oh you have built a mosque, you are all Jews, you are all Christians. Now you have become Islam, have you? Yes, we are Islam. Are you Jews? Yes, we are Jews. Are you Christians? Yes, we are Christians. Are you all three? Yes, we are all three." Just nod your head. If you nod your head to anything they say they will think that you are crazy and leave you in peace and go away.<sup>121</sup>

For Bawa then, any confusion brought forth by the addition of God's House appears to be beyond the confines of creedal exclusiveness. The Fellowship was to be inclusive of all these tendencies, and "God's House," or the *masjid*, was seen as a facet of the diverse Abrahamic make-up of the community in North America. According to Bawa's teachings of the purpose of the *masjid*, it can be viewed as a completion of the diverse project of the Fellowship, more than an enterprise in exclusivity.

The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen *Masjid* was completed on May 27, 1984, in time for Ramadan, when fasting and breaking of meals as a community and the celebration of *Eid* (end of

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<sup>121</sup> Bawa Muhaiyaddeen discourse "Talk to Executive Committee: As One Family, Look for the Truth. This is God's House" (May 1, 1984). Translated by Dr. Ganesan.

Ramadan) was cemented as another central ritual of observation, along with *mawlid*s (birthday celebrations) of the Prophet Muhammad and Abdul Qadir Jilani which had already began in Sri Lanka and continued into Philadelphia.<sup>122</sup> In addressing this issue in her research, Webb (2013) wrote:

The building of the mosque was a public articulation of Islam that brought into high relief the question of the relationship of Bawa's teachings to Islamic practice. Did Bawa intend a gradual movement toward Islamic religious practices (such as *salat*) as an outer manifestation of inner maturity and discipline, or did he intend it as a concession to the human need for unifying cultural forms and rituals, despite the "illusory" quality of religious distinction, or was it both? (201)

The question of whether Bawa began with the highest teaching (i.e., silent *dhikr*) and built the mosque to provide the primary foundations which could be "bypassed" to reach the ultimate goal of union with God or whether the institution of *salat* was actually the highest teaching that Bawa was priming his disciples for from the beginning is an ongoing debate for members of the Fellowship. It is the responses by Fellowship members to the question raised by Webb that highlights a pluralistic approach to the understanding of Sufism, Islam and spirituality according to those affiliated with Bawa and his Fellowship in North America. There were those who followed the teachings of their *shaykh* without question and participated wholeheartedly in this project. Those who loved the *shaykh* but choose not to partake in this new venture and selected the wisdom over the outward religion, and those who left stated that they had come to Bawa not seeking a religion, especially not Islam. This seminal moment in

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<sup>122</sup> More on *mawlid* is discussed in this chapter's section on *mawlid*.

the institutional history of the Fellowship should not take away from the fact that the *masjid* is only one sub-space within a larger complex that forms the Fellowship Headquarters in Philadelphia. The various sub-spaces within the Fellowship play formative roles in the ritual and daily life of the Fellowship and its members.

## Negotiating Sacred Spaces and Practices

### *Rituals in the Subspaces of the Fellowship*



Figure 2.1: a side view of the Fellowship *masjid* during the *rasul mawlid* (birthday celebration) of the Prophet for which the flags are hanging. Notable in this photograph are flags, which are hung at the beginning of the *mawlid* celebrations and are taken down at the end of the *mawlid* celebrations, resembling practices of flag rising in Sri Lanka, not only among Muslims, but Hindus and Christians as well. Photograph taken by author, January 2014.

Standing on Overbrook Road and facing the Fellowship, one notices immediately that it appears as all other houses on the same street. The *masjid*, which was the final addition to the

overall complex, was built where the garden initially was, and is visible from the side of the house, the angle from which the photograph in Figure 2.1 was taken. The Fellowship initially was the space in which Bawa Muhaiyaddeen resided. His room with his bed remains memorialized and is what I call an *ancillary shrine*, due to the preservation of his personal items, such as his bed and chair, as captured in Figure 2.2. Throughout my stay at the Fellowship, school groups from nearby universities and colleges often visited, and I participated in their guided tours. During these visits, students asked what the purpose of Bawa's room was. Depending on the member leading the tour, the response varied. Some expressed that this room was a "museum" of sorts preserving the items of Bawa, while others explained that this was a meditation room. The distinct interpretations that were given to the visitors by different Fellowship members alone suggest that individuals utilized Bawa's room according to their own needs.

This room serves numerous purposes for the Fellowship. For example, it is where females sit and listen to the *mawlid*s for the Prophet Muhammad and the *Qutb* Abdul Qadir Jilani, whereas the males gather for the *mawlid* recitation in the Arabic classroom on the main floor near the inside entrance to the *masjid*. Fellowship meetings also take place in Bawa's room. In essence, this is a continuation of the purpose of this room as it was used when Bawa was alive, not only was it his own bedroom, but Bawa's room served as one of the central spaces of activity, where a private or small group (as opposed to the larger public discourses given in the meeting hall downstairs) met with Bawa.



Figure 2.2 Bawa's bed in Bawa's room, preserved and a site for personal devotions but also used for meetings and events such as *mawlid*s. Photograph by author, April 2014.

In Bawa's room there is a television set which is used for various events to play video discourses of Bawa or to televise the *mawlid* recitations from the classroom downstairs to the women gathering in Bawa's room. There is also a bowl, which contains an assortment of candies, be it Hershey's kisses, chocolates or lollipops.<sup>123</sup> When Bawa was alive, at the end of his discourses he would distribute chocolate, fruit or a food item to the children and to the adults. In order to preserve this practice of receiving a token or a blessing from the guru (i.e., *prasad*), a bowl of treats is always kept in the room. Often children who come to the house jet straight to Bawa's room, step upon the small step stool by the book case where the bowl sits and search through the bowl to find their favourite chocolate treasure and jet out of the room beaming with joy.

<sup>123</sup> In Sri Lankan spaces of Bawa, there is no comparable parallel to this bowl of sweets. However, during special holy days, sweets are handed out in small plastic bags, and these include chocolates, fruits or cookies.

Older members usually venerate the bed or sit in meditation first and then go to the bowl of sweets, some being cautious to walk out of the room facing Bawa's bed, so as not to be disrespectful by leaving with their backs toward the bed. Bawa's room, therefore, is a significant space wherein private devotions take place throughout the day because it is assumed that something of his presence (via his personal items) remains. Many members of the Fellowship come and sit beside Bawa's bed, especially in times of difficulties. Some even spend their nights by Bawa's bed, even though others discourage this, as it signals an attachment to an earthly Bawa, as opposed to the spiritual one. Many also sit and read beside Bawa's bed, finding a book from the shelf or the book on the nightstand, *The Resonance of Allah* (2001), notable in the photograph in Figure 2.2.

Aside from private and individual devotions that take place in Bawa's room, this room is also the center of various rituals and ceremonies held for members of the Fellowship. For instance, on Fridays at 8:00pm silent *dhikr* takes place in Bawa's room. Family commemorations are also held in this room, such as baby blessings (usually the new born baby is laid on the bed of Bawa), followed by some readings from Bawa's discourses. Sometimes wedding blessings take place in this room as well.<sup>124</sup> Bawa's room also serves as a room for women who have young children (i.e., wearing diapers) and are not permitted to enter the mosque.<sup>125</sup> Many women use Bawa's room to perform *salat*, if they do not wish to go to the *masjid* or if it is too crowded during Friday afternoon prayers. The Fellowship complex is equipped with a house speaker, so *salat* prayers and meetings are arranged to not

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<sup>124</sup> At the side of this room is also an office, where administrative duties are performed, such as answering the telephone and or the completion of transcriptions or typing for publications etc. Most of the paintings that were completed by Bawa are also in this room, and are found throughout the Fellowship. Notable too is a photograph of Mankumban, the shrine to Bawa and Maryam in Velanai Island, Sri Lanka.

<sup>125</sup> The question of pollution arises with the presence of diapers, though some interpretations suggest that pollution is lessened with a baby who wears a diaper, there are others who understand that the filth of the diaper should not be in the mosque, a pure place. The Fellowship practices the latter.

conflict with each other. This also means that when *salat* prayers are taking place in the *masjid*, one can hear it from anywhere in the larger Fellowship house.

### *Everyday Spaces of the Fellowship*

Some members of the Fellowship also live in the Fellowship House. There are several rooms, both on the second floor of the Fellowship (where Bawa's room is) and the third floor. On the third floor is the main administrative and archival office. It is here that some discourses are stored and members complete translation and transcription and type work for publications, which is completed in the Fellowship Press, located in the trailer house in the backyard. Volunteers from the Fellowship consider it their "duty" to Bawa and to God to complete these services and tasks.

The main floor, where the meeting hall is, also contains several rooms where members reside. The meeting hall also includes a bookshop, where copies of Bawa's books, paintings and discourses are sold. In the main floor there is an industrial kitchen. Regular meals are cooked, wherein members and individuals come, especially if they need food. They take food and sit in on an evening discourse meeting. Weekends prove to be the busiest along with special Muslim holy days such as *iftar* and *Eid*, or *mawlid*s in terms of numbers of individuals who visit. Fellowship volunteers cook all meals. There is also a kitchen on the second floor near Bawa's room, called the "Ceylonese Kitchen" (Sri Lankan kitchen). In the early days of the Fellowship, the Sri Lankan members of the Fellowship cooked in this kitchen, and the Tamil members of the Fellowship who reside at the house still utilize this kitchen and for that reason the name has remained. However, it continues to be used as a communal kitchen,



especially during special holy days when cooking and food preparation is completed in both kitchens.

The kitchens were rooms that Bawa utilized, as he frequently cooked for his disciples. When Bawa was physically unable to make it to the kitchen downstairs to cook, disciples of Bawa would bring the ingredients and materials to his room where the feast would be prepared. When he completed preparing the meal, he served his disciples. These meal preparations became moments when Bawa gave discourses. Cooking and providing meals to all the visitors was a significant part of Bawa's ministry and a testament to his own personage, as he was a farmer and cook. This practice is evident in the Sri Lankan branches as well.<sup>126</sup> As such, food cooked in the Fellowship is always done in the name of service to Bawa and some prepare meals while playing Bawa's audio discourses or songs in the background. Cooking and serving food at the Fellowship by disciples is a memorialization and continuation of Bawa's own ministry to and by his followers.

### *The Communal Spaces*

In the early days of the Fellowship it was the meeting room that served as the primary space in which members congregated to hear Bawa's teachings. Bawa would discourse on Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings. Currently, these days remain the weekly days of meetings. On Wednesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, a member of the Fellowship will select a discourse, either in an audio or video format to play. During the month of April 2014, these weekday meetings were the least attended, sometimes averaging only five people (including myself). Of course these meetings are streamed live via Shoutcast

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<sup>126</sup> Practices related to food are further seen in the Sri Lankan sites in Section II.

online, so it is difficult assess actual listeners logged in online from across America, Canada and sometimes even from Sri Lanka, versus those only physically present.

On Sunday mornings, the meeting, which takes place at 10am, tends to attract the largest turnout, considering that it is a weekend meeting and full lunch is served. This sometimes overlaps with people coming to the *masjid* to pray. A member of the executive committee usually holds the meetings on Sunday mornings. At times they play a discourse or they may add commentary, or read from selected discourses. The extent to which the facilitator of the meeting may “prompt” or add “commentary” to these meetings on Sundays is variable in the Fellowship. It is a trend that Mauroof even noted when Bawa left Philadelphia for Sri Lanka for the first time. This is because individuals interpret Bawa’s discourses differently. Although no issues occurred during my attendance at any of these meetings, it is evident that members who may have a far more universalistic orientation towards the Fellowship and Bawa’s teachings may present interpretations that are not agreed upon by all. This is especially the case if they suggest that all religions, even Islam or even Sufism, must be abandoned to understand Bawa. Some members only want the discourse by Bawa played and the opportunity to personally experience it, while others look forward to the commentary provided by facilitators of meetings.

On Saturday mornings there are separate children’s and teenager’s meetings. Young children, sometimes as young as one year old and up to seven or eight years old, attend. Usually one parent member is designated to lead the meeting. At these meetings, it is not only the parents (who were born into the Fellowship or met Bawa as children) that bring their children, but it is also the grandparents (first generation of American disciples of Bawa) that bring their grandchildren to the meetings, if the parents themselves do not attend. The leader

of the meeting selects a story from one of Bawa's children's books and reads it, and provides the opportunity to discuss it through prompts and questions, sometimes activities might be included (i.e., crafts or colouring etc).

The teenagers gather in Bawa's room. Sometimes older members or younger adults also sit in on the meetings and share their personal experiences or interpretations. Again one member leads the meeting, they select a reading, usually from Bawa's children's story, and they discuss it. At the end of the meeting, they might have a game or a pop quiz, and treats may be handed out. The teenage meetings typically consist of about five people or less, and the numbers for the children's meeting also varies, but have been generally less than ten. These meetings, like all the Fellowship meetings and the prayers at the *masjid*, always end with the singing of the *salawat* to the Prophet Muhammad.

The *tasilya*, *as-salat 'ala Muhammad* (plural. *salawat sharifa*), or invoking blessings on the Prophet Muhammad, forms one of the central invocations in Islamic communities. Annemarie Schimmel<sup>127</sup> notes "the pious Muslims will never mention the Prophet's name or refer to him without adding those words" (Schimmel 1985, 92).<sup>128</sup> This practice was often seen in Sufi communities, as they recited the *tasilya* hundreds or numerous times during *dhikr* or the prayer of remembrance of Allah. The recitation of blessings to Muhammad is connected to hadith traditions, such as the hadith *qudsi*, or saying attributed to God: "Do you approve, O Muhammad, that nobody from your community utters the formula of blessing for you [even] once but I bless him ten times, and nobody from your community greets you [even] but once I

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<sup>127</sup> The prominent scholar of Islam Annemarie Schimmel wrote over fifty books and published over hundreds of articles. She earned a second doctorate in comparative religion, and she taught theology at the University of Ankara Turkey, becoming the first female non-Muslim professor to do this. In 1967 she inaugurated the Indo-Muslim studies program at Harvard University and taught there until 1992.

<sup>128</sup> For more on the developments of the *tasliya* please see Schimmel's study *And Muhammad is His Messenger* (1985) pp. 92-104.

greet him ten times” (quoted in Schimmel 1985, 92-93). It is such traditions that led to the understanding that the invocation of blessing upon Muhammad through the *salawat* meant the gaining of “good credits” or the seeking of intercession from the exemplary being of Prophet Muhammad (Schimmel 1985, 92-93). It consists of the “blessing formula” *salla Allahu ‘alaihi wa sallam* (God bless him and give him peace) within the Fellowship. It is sung and as such this remains one of the most critical shared ritual practices that is common in all sites of Bawa- Jaffna, Philadelphia and Toronto.<sup>129</sup> The devotion to the Prophet Muhammad, especially through the singing of the *salawat* and also the *mawlid* forms a central current in the ministries of Bawa.

After the completion of the *salawat* lunch is also prepared for Saturday, and this is a vegetarian and child-friendly meal, such as vegetarian tacos or hot dogs. They are very popular with the young members of the Fellowship. Members, who live close by, sometimes stop by for the Saturday lunch to socialize and connect with one another. Other times, if a baby or young member of the Fellowship is celebrating a birthday, families bring a cake and celebrate with the larger Fellowship family. In this regard, the Fellowship is a community formed around a relationship to Bawa.

### *The Masjid of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen*

At the Fellowship, Friday centers on the prayers that take place at the *masjid*. This means that those who live in the neighbourhood or Muslims from the city attend strictly for Friday prayers (*jum‘ah*) and *khutbah* (sermon), and use the Fellowship space not necessarily for Bawa but for the completion of Islamic obligatory prayers. This is the case throughout the

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<sup>129</sup> This is also notable at Bawa’s spaces in Sri Lanka in Chapter 5 and 6.

week, as five times prayers are always kept at the *masjid*, though Friday afternoons and the weekends usually attract the largest numbers at the mosque. If one were to visit the Fellowship only for Friday *jum‘ah*, one’s perception of this community would be that it is an Islamic *ummah* (community) with largely South Asian and African-American Muslims with a few Euro-American converts.

After prayers in the *masjid*, most gather in the Fellowship hall, only after stopping in the kitchen where a traditional South Asian meal is served consisting of rice and an assortment of vegetarian sides (i.e., *dhal* (lentils) and potato curry). Those who attend prayers usually pack meals to take food home or back to their places of work, while those who have time to socialize do so in the Fellowship meeting hall. It is particularly at times such as these, at the conclusion of communal prayers or liturgy, and the beginning of formal socialization centred around food that one can see groups racially and culturally segmented. Those who are part of the Fellowship, if they come to *jum‘ah* prayers often form together and chat (naturally as they know each other) but not necessarily being exclusive yet not also extending beyond their comfort zones. Those who are African-American Muslims and even regular Fellowship members usually form groups of women and men and chat amongst themselves.

The same is true for South Asian Muslims who stay with their families. I am not alluding to any perceived animosity between diverse racial and cultural groups who gather, but intermixing between certain cultural groups is often lacking. Though the historical reality of racial demographics of the Fellowship have changed throughout the forty-three years, it is significant to remember that there are still undertones of racial segregation in mosque cultures across America which become apparent after *masjid* prayers at the Fellowship. Simmons goes on to explain:

you know it's really a lesson for me, as a person who since I was you know eighteen, was involved in the Civil Rights movement, and fighting you know against Jim Crow or racial discrimination and segregation and all of that, and the Fellowship [...] I have you know very informally, sort of studied how persistent race is. And [...] it's not only race in, in cases of the Fellowship, also it's economics too because many of the African Americans who have stayed are poor people. And you have some very wealthy white people. So this is all you know [...] it's class as well as race, that often operates. And I know there are people who really tried to bridge those, those gaps. And you know when I've taken African Americans there, often they cannot get past the racial composition to even stay long enough to hear what is being taught. So it becomes [...] difficult to change the population demographics, you know because race is still such a prominent factor in American culture. And you know as Martin Luther King once said, the most segregated hour in America is eleven o'clock on a Sunday. So even you know in a place like Philadelphia, you have predominantly black mosque, very separate from the other groups, you know be they Asian, or Turkish, you know [...] the mosque [are] very racially divided there also.<sup>130</sup>

In Simmon's comments above, she mentions the cultural and racial dynamics between those who attend the *masjid*. It is not based on a singular cultural or ethnic group, such as Turkish or African-Americans, as seen in other mosques in America. The *masjid* congregation at the Fellowship is racially and socio-economically diverse and in some respects owes its

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<sup>130</sup> Interview with author, via Skype, May 16, 2014.

maintenance to the head imam of the *masjid* who has been navigating between catering to students of Bawa who converted to Islam and recent newcomers to the community.

Ahamed Kabeer, originally from South India, met Bawa in Jaffna, Sri Lanka when he was a pearl diver. He was one of the first two imams appointed at the Fellowship. He shared responsibility with a Syrian imam, who eventually left the Fellowship over a dispute with Bawa, and so imam Miller, who was acting as the Executive Treasurer, was appointed as one of the imams. Imam Muhammad Abdur-Razzaq Miller, or Dick Thambi (younger brother) as Bawa called him, is the current head imam of the *masjid*.<sup>131</sup> Imam Miller maintains both an administrative position in the Executive Committee and the position of the official prayer leader of the *masjid* of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, which is multicultural, unlike many *masjids* that remain culturally and ethnically homogenous throughout North America. When I asked imam Miller how Bawa trained him, a young man who came from an American Christian background, to be an imam, he explained that the training started from the moment he met Bawa in the early 1970s:

So that I never thought of being an imam because I could see that was a position that entitled one to a lot of abuse. And I just wanted to follow the Sufi path you know, which was more esoteric [...]. So I was sitting in his room in the mosque. Of course I helped with the calligraphy in the front [of the mosque]. And the rest of the time he had me in the treasury making sure everything went smoothly and all of the cheques were written and all of the supplies were coming in that sort of thing. So and then of course the very day I was

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<sup>131</sup> If he is unable to complete Friday *jum'ah* prayers, there are several other leaders or sub-imams who lead prayers, all of whom are devotees of Bawa to some capacity, such as a Syrian-American Muslim and an African-American convert to Islam. The former lives in the Fellowship and also serves as a *muezzin*, or the one who gives the call to prayer.

out helping with the calligraphy in the front of the mosque [...] Abu A'la from Syria, was the guy actually, originally who was teaching the Arabic lessons, was an imam and Ahamed Kabir. So I was just studying with him, studying wisdom and things like that. And one day there was a big fight. People came running upstairs and went the imams are fighting the imams are fighting. Bawa said "tell them to stop fighting" [laughing], the obvious solution right?

[... continues]

I mean of course if they hear Bawa's telling them to do something then they should do it.

[... continues]

[...S]o the person came up and said "well I told them Bawa and they wouldn't stop fighting." He said "hmmm well go down and tell them again and tell them that Bawa says they should stop fighting." It didn't work. Bawa they're still fighting. You could hear it upstairs. He looks around the room and I'm sitting in the corner, you know, studying. He said "Dick Thambi!" [mumbles] "Yes Bawa." He said "you're the head imam; you go down and stop it." That was it [...]. That is how it happened. So you can see, there was training along the way. But it wasn't something that I knew about. It was something that was happening. And he knew about it and I learned about it all of a sudden.<sup>132</sup>

Until recently imam Kabeer and Miller split duties between the *masjid* and other Fellowship responsibilities, such as *mawlid* recitations and baby and wedding blessings. Kabeer is now much older and is not able to complete these tasks anymore, though he did lead the singing of songs during *mawlid* recitations in 2014. This was not without difficulty, as he used a walker. This of course raises critical issues for the appointment of an imam for the future of the

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<sup>132</sup> Interview with author, the classroom of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, April 16, 2014.



*masjid*. They not only need to be a Muslim prayer leader but also must have ties to the Fellowship community as a whole and thus devoted to Bawa.<sup>133</sup>

It is essential to understand that the Fellowship in Philadelphia is inclusive of Bawa's room, the Fellowship meeting hall and the *masjid*. It is these sub-spaces that form the overall Fellowship Headquarters. The addition of the Fellowship *masjid* created much friction, as many saw it as defining the Fellowship as an Islamic community outwardly. This definition continues to be a site of negotiation as it is precisely what attracts Muslims who are not interested in Bawa to utilize the space for the performance of Islamic ritual. Activities centered on Bawa prior to the institutionalization of the *masjid* were not aborted after the construction of the *masjid*. Rather they continued to thrive and do so concurrently with *masjid* activities after it was completed in 1984, suggesting, at least initially, that one does not supersede the other.

These concurrent developments mean there is now a presence of new immigrants with broad ethnic backgrounds such as Pakistani, Punjabi and Syrian, etc. The *masjid* attracts large crowds during Muslim holidays such as Ramadan, *mawlid*s and weekly *jum'ah* prayers and these numbers sometimes exceed those present at Fellowship meetings for Bawa. This unbalance has raised concerns for some Fellowship members in terms of the future of the Fellowship and its make-up. These concerns coincide with the understanding that Bawa did not necessarily proscribe the keeping of Islamic ritual as the centrality of his teachings. Jeane Richarde, a senior student who met Bawa in 1972 in Philadelphia, captures this sentiment:

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<sup>133</sup> These dynamics are further unpacked in my discussion of issues of interpretation of what the Fellowship is in Chapter 9 in *Negotiating Future Visions of the Fellowship*.

Well we don't, we don't claim to have a religion. I mean there are people here who have made it into Muslim, but it's far beyond Muslim. It's beyond any form. I don't have to go into that mosque, I don't. I don't have to go in there. And God knows I can sit here and say that because I'm not saying anything against him [Bawa]. That's for people who need to go. People who need to go and do that five times prayer, the prayer has to be on a moment-to-moment basis. We're doing prayer. There is not a moment when the prayer is not going on. The attitude is what determines whether the prayer is going on. The surrender because Allah, the surrender before God, the surrender for the power, the surrender to the truth, that's what determines the whole thing.<sup>134</sup>

Richarde's comments signal to one approach found amongst disciples of Bawa who interpret Bawa's teaching beyond any religion. For those who share Richarde's approach to Bawa's teachings' forms (i.e., the outer) must be transcended, and this includes the mosque.

Interpretations of Bawa's teachings as beyond Islam are complicated by the arrival of immigrant Muslims who attend the Fellowship, because of it further affirms the Fellowship's *Islamicness*. In an interview with Sarah, a member of the Fellowship who came to Bawa early during the 1970s and converted to Islam, she explained these broader currents between these spaces when I asked if those that attend the *masjid* have crossed over to Fellowship activities:

Some of them do. Not as much I would say because you know there are a lot of people who come here specifically because [...] we observe the five time prayers and then for the two festivals, you know the *Eids*. So we have a huge crowd of people that comes [*sic*] for that. But I'd say there's a lot of them that do, you know, they come specifically because

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<sup>134</sup> Interview with author, kitchen in the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 8, 2014.

they love our mosque and they respect that we have Bawa, but maybe they haven't, they wouldn't come in like the members who are really here seriously to study Bawa's teachings.<sup>135</sup>

Both Sarah and Richarde's perspectives provide the poles, which create the spectrum of interpretations in the Fellowship. It is due to the proximity of those who range from universally inclined devotees of Bawa to those who approach Islam through cultural and mystical understandings of Sufism that challenge any singular definition of the Fellowship.

### **Piety and Devotions at the Fellowship**

#### *Mawlid for the Prophet at the Fellowship*

In the remaining portions of this chapter, I provide details of the range of interpretations of communal rituals and gatherings at the Fellowship. I situate two ritual examples, the first is centered on Muslim rituals and prayers (i.e., *salat* and *mawlid*) and the second is focused on Bawa's teachings and the commemoration of his life. I provide more descriptive analysis of my experience of *mawlid* in Philadelphia. I choose to experience and discuss the *mawlid* because such celebrations are not readily captured in the North American Islamic experience, where *salat* and celebrations for Ramadan (*iftar* and *Eid*) are more prevalently discussed. I also choose the *mawlid* because, as Mauroof explained in his dissertation, it was a practice that Bawa instituted as early as 1962 in Jaffna. Thus, it remains a unique commemorative legacy with ties to classical Islamic piety and Sri Lankan Sufism even before the *masjid* raised concerns of an "Islamic label" in Philadelphia. So it forms a distinct reality of Bawa's

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<sup>135</sup> This member of the Fellowship requested to be anonymous and so I have used the pseudonym Sarah. The interview was completed in the Fellowship classroom, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 2, 2014.

communities both in Philadelphia and Jaffna.<sup>136</sup> Thereafter, the second section focuses on the commemoration of the death anniversary of Bawa or the *urs*.

In a pamphlet entitled, *Why We Recite Maulids*, published by the Fellowship based on a discourse given by Bawa on February 7, 1982, Bawa explains why it is a duty to celebrate the *mawlid*:

What is this month that has been set-aside for Muhammad (*Sal.*)? It is a month in which we honour Muhammad (*Sal.*) and give praise to Allah. We thank Muhammad (*Sal.*) and praise Allah. This is why we observe the *mawlid*, like we did today. This is not wrong. We are not making a comparison, even though some people may claim that this is what is [sic] we are doing. But you, children who are true believers (*mu'min*) if you have absolute faith (*iman*), then it is your right and privilege to honour resplendent beings, the *qutbs*, the friends of God (*auliya*) and the prophets who came to help us and show us the right path. And it is your right and privilege to give praise to Allah, the One who sent them. It is our duty to do this. This is what we have to do. We should think about this (1991, 10).

The celebration of the *mawlids* or commemoration of the birthdays of holy figures in Islam forms one of the notable rituals observed in the Fellowship instituted by Bawa.<sup>137</sup> For Bawa it

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<sup>136</sup> My fieldwork for my dissertation research consisted of one year, which limited my ability to be present at the *mawlids* in both Jaffna and Philadelphia. I have attempted to fill this gap by speaking to members in both communities about *mawlid* experiences, and have seen photographs and videos captured of *mawlids* in Sri Lanka. I hope future fieldwork will allow me to experience *mawlids* in Sri Lanka as well.

<sup>137</sup> *Mawlid*, or birth celebrations, honour a saintly figure that has deceased. It is commemorated on the birth day of the saint or holy figure, such as the Prophet Muhammad. It is a distinctive Sufi practice within Islam and speaks to the understanding that God's grace and blessings can be accessed through his holy servants. A *mawlid* is commonly celebrated at a tomb of a Sufi saint or his/her relic, but may be celebrated in sacred spaces associated with the saint. *Mawlids* also play important economic, social and political roles as these celebrations take place over days or even

is not only the Prophet Muhammad, whose metaphysical existence prior to creation, is honoured during the *mawlid* but Bawa also commemorated the celebration of the anniversary of the *Qutb* (axial pole), which for Bawa was the Baghdadi saint Abdul Qadir Jilani. In explaining the significance of the *mawlid* recitation for Abdul Qadir Jilani, Bawa explains:

Finally, fifty-one generations after Muhammad (*Sal.*), after fifty-one signs, the *Qutb* (*Ral.*)<sup>138</sup> was sent as the son of Fatimah (*Ral.*). He was sent as a form, as a symbol. The name given to this *Qutb* was Muhyiddin ‘Abdul-Qadir (*Ral.*). The mysterious *Qutb* (*Ral.*) was given a name, made into the form of man (*insan*) and shown as a symbol or representation to mankind, just as Muhammad (*Sal.*) was sent down in form as a symbol. Therefore, if we hold a *mawlid*, or a feast, to honour the *Qutb* (*Ral.*), are we setting up a comparison? Because the *Qutb* (*Ral.*), is a sheikh to wisdom and a guide to our life, to the One who brought him down to us. This is what the *mawlid* is about. We praise God directly, and we also praise Him by honouring the great ones, the prophets, and the wise ones that He sent down to us as guides. We give praise to God and we honour the ones who are our examples and guides. Is this wrong? No, it is not. We do this in a state of true faith (Muhaiyaddeen 1991, 11, 14).

In Bawa’s explanation above for the celebration of the *mawlid*, it is evident that *mawlid* practice within the Islamic community is not uniformly accepted. *Mawlids*, especially in

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weeks in some regions such as Egypt, where pilgrims travel from afar to participate. For more please see *El Moulid: Egyptian Religious Festival* (1990) a documentary by Fadwa El Guindi that captures the *mawlid* of the Egyptian saint Sayyid Ahmad al-Badwai of Tanta. And also N. J. G. Kaptein’s *Muhammad’s Birthday Festival: Early History in the Central Muslim Lands and Development in the Muslim West until the 10/16<sup>th</sup> Century* (1993) for a historical account of the development of the *mawlid* of the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>138</sup> *Ral.* signifies the recitation of *Radi-Allahu anhu* or the requesting Allah’s blessings upon the individual, after whose name it is repeated.

honour of the Prophet Muhammad, have nonetheless formed a central act of veneration and piety amongst various cultures of Muslim societies (Schimmel 1985; Kaptein 1993; Holmes 2007).

Marion Holmes Katz (2007)<sup>139</sup> writes that the *mawlid* was seen as *bid'a*, or innovation, centuries after the life of the Prophet (1). The tradition itself was attributed at its earliest within the Fatimid Shi'a dynasty which ruled Egypt from 969 to 1171 when the Prophet's birthday was celebrated as a "state occasion" (Katz 2007, 1). These "festivals" which were hosted by the Fatimid dynasty "involved the distribution of sweets to state and religious functionaries and a brief ceremonial viewing of the ruling Fatimid Imam" (Katz 2007, 1, 2). Sunnis were also said to have commemorated this festival during the end of the Fatimid dynasty, which "combined feasting and sufi audition (*sama*) with various kinds of literary production" (Katz 2007, 2).

Its subsequent development was not as a "state ceremony" but actually medieval and modern *mawlids* "were often domestic occasions focusing on private devotional practice," while the Fatimid *mawlids* did not include narration of the birth of the Prophet as evident in most Sunni *mawlids* (Katz 2007, 4). Katz suggests that it was likely Sufis, such as the early Iranian mystic Sahl al-Tustari (d. 896), who used the light verse of the Qur'an (24:35) to develop the teaching of the light of the Muhammad.<sup>140</sup> The teaching of the primordial

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<sup>139</sup> Marion Holmes Katz is a Professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at New York University. Her areas of research are on issues of Islamic law (*shari'a*), gender and ritual. Aside from writing on the *mawlid* of the Prophet, she has also written on Sunni law of ritual purity in her book *Body of Text* (2002). For more on *mawlids* please also see Samuli Schielke's Dissertation *Snacks and Saints: Mawlid Festivals and the Politics of Festivity, Piety and Modernity in Contemporary Egypt* (PhD Thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2006).

<sup>140</sup> There is a cosmological tradition within Islam, and especially in Sufism, in which the Prophet Muhammad is understood as the first manifestation of the light of Allah. Such interpretations developed from Qur'anic passages that refer to God as light (*nur*), such as in *an-Nur* 24:35, and the reference to Prophet Muhammad as light (33:46, 25:61). For some Sufis, Prophet Muhammad or Nur Muhammad would become representative of the highest

Muhammad is a significant focus in *mawlid* narratives. It is these narratives that are recited in the Fellowship. The tradition of the *mawlid* was not only limited in its commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad. The first devotional text found that was likely used for *mawlid* ceremony was for Ali, while *mawlid* texts for the birth of Imam Hasan and Husayn and Fatima are also noted historically (Katz 2007 6-7). Below for the sake of space, I focus specifically on the *mawlid* of the Prophet Muhammad. But both the *mawlid* of the Prophet and Jilani follow similar patterns of ritual, such as where women and men sit, the male only recitation and the sharing of meals, while it is the recitations of stories of these personages that are different.

#### *Nabi Mawlid: Birthday Celebrations of the Prophet Muhammad*

During my fieldwork, the recitation of the *mawlid* for the Prophet Muhammad took place from January 2<sup>nd</sup> to January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2014. According to the Julian calendar the birthday of Muhammad fell on January 14<sup>th</sup>. The twelve days of recitation of the *mawlid*, leading up to the birthday of the Prophet, took place after midafternoon (*asr*) prayers. At the Fellowship, *mawlid* attendance is larger during weekends and Friday evenings. Being winter this year also made it difficult for many to travel physically to the Fellowship, though many listened to the recitation via Shoutcast online, which streams the audio in real time through the Internet.

During *mawlid* recitations males gather and lead the recitation from the Fellowship classroom on the main floor. The females, who listen to the recitation, can view the recitation via a television screen in Bawa's room. The meeting hall also screens the recitation on its large screen and is a mix-gendered space. The text utilized the year I was present for the *mawlid* was *The Subhana Maulid: Maulidun-Nabi (Sal.)* (2013) which was translated by imam

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intellect. This is further discussed in Chapter 7, but for more see Annemarie Schimmel's *And Muhammad is His Messenger* (1985).

Miller and Ruqaiyyah E. R. Lee-Hood, a member of the Boston Branch of the Fellowship and also a PhD student at Harvard University.<sup>141</sup> The first half of the *mawlid* recitations weaves narratives that emphasize the light of Muhammad to Muhammad's eventual manifestation in Aminah to his earthly birth. After each reading of the narrative a song of blessing or praise for the Prophet is sung and completed with the *salawat* before the next narrative is read. These are all read and completed in Arabic by males. Those present can follow in booklets. These booklets of the *mawlid* are available in Arabic, in Arabic transliteration and in English.<sup>142</sup>

The *mawlid* recitation is paused for *maghrib* prayers. Not everyone goes to the *masjid* to complete *salat*, as some females complete their *salat* in Bawa's room, while others take a break and visit the kitchen or socialize in the meeting hall downstairs. It is after the completion of the sunset prayers that the recitation continues. In my experience, I found that the second half of the recitation of the *mawlid* was more highly attended than the first half. The second half is deemed the most significant portion of the recitation, since it is then that the *dua*, or prayers of intercession to the Prophet Muhammad, is completed along with prayers for his blessings.

After the singing of *Hubbun-Nabi* (loving the Prophet), imam Miller read from a discourse given by Bawa Muhaiyaddeen that related to the Prophet Muhammad while Ahamed Kabir led in the singing of the Tamil song of *Engal Nabi Natha* (Our Prophet Lord), as many used English transliteration of the Tamil song of praise to the Prophet Muhammad to

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<sup>141</sup> It starts: "The Birth of the Prophet, *sallallahu 'alaihi wa salaam*, according to Shaikh al-Khatib Muhammad al-Madani and, it is said, the Proof of Islam, Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, may *Allahu ta'ala* grant them both mercy and grace" (Miller and Lee-Hood 2013, 1). The recitation begins with chapters from the Qur'an (i.e., *al-Fatiha*, *al-Iklas*, *al-Falaq* and *an-Nas*).

<sup>142</sup> The Fellowship bookstore sells copies of the *mawlid* booklets, while copies of English, Arabic and Arabic-English transliteration booklets are also available in Bawa's room.



follow along. The climactic moment is with the standing and singing of *Ya Nabi* (O Prophet) in Arabic:

O Prophet, may peace be upon you!

O Messenger, may peace be upon you!

O Beloved, may peace be upon you!

May the blessings of Allah be upon you!

The Full Moon rose, radiant upon us,  
the other moons hidden by it,  
the equal to your perfect beauty we have never seen,  
O, Countenance of Bliss!

You are the sun! You are a moon!

You are a Light above Light!

You are an elixir, dearly beloved!

You are the Lamps of the Hearts!

O Beloved! O Muhammad!

O Bridegroom of the East and West!

O one supported and extolled,

O Imam of two *Qiblahs*!

One who has seen your face is blissful,

O Benefactor of Parents!

May your pure pond, serene and cool,

On the day of Resurrection be our oasis!

O Allah, Forgiver of mistakes,

and even of mortal sins,

You are the Veiler from what corrupts us,

and veil our stumblings from the gossips.

O Patron of good deeds,

and Exalter to high degrees,

Forgive me my sins,

And wipe away my evil actions!

O Knower of the secret and most hidden,

O Answerer of prayers,

O my Lord grace us every one.

With all of the pious deeds.

O Prophet, may peace be upon you!

O Messenger, may peace be upon you!

O Beloved, may peace be upon you!

May the blessings of Allah be upon you! (Miller and Lee-Hood 2013, 26-27)

When I asked members of the Fellowship why this song was sung while standing, many explained that according to Bawa the Prophet Muhammad walked in during this time in the *mawlid* and that is why people sing it while standing- it is a sign of respect. During the singing of the song for the Prophet Muhammad, a young child, often at the request of one of the female elders, retrieves the water sprinkler from Bawa's table and goes to each person in the room, and eventually through the meeting hall and the classroom, and sprinkles rose water into their palms of those present or dabbles some on their heads. Those who had it sprinkled into their hands, wipe it on their face and forehead. The culmination of this recitation is the



Figure 2.3: *Qutb mawlid*'s presentation of food in the classroom where the males congregate, which is a similar set up to the *rasul mawlid*. Many members and visitors who come for the celebration of *mawlids* and other special holidays bring sweets and other savoury food items. At times, these have ranged from Dunkin Donuts, the local American donut shop or Indian items such as fried chickpea-mix (*pakoara*) or traditional Indian sweets, along with fruits, cakes, chips and many more. Small children would be commissioned throughout the night of the *mawlid* recitation to take bowls of this sweet and savoury food and place them either in the room where the men are gathered in the classroom or where the women are gathered in Bawa's room. Photograph taken by author, February 2014.

invocation of the *dua*. Due to its importance it is first said in English and then repeated in Arabic. The opening of the *dua* begins “Now the noble *Maulid* has come to an end, the *Maulid* of al-Mustafa, the Chosen One, the elect, the kind and compassionate, the lofty and sublime, may Allah shower His blessings upon him, and upon his people and his companions, and grant them His eternal safety and peace!” (Miller and Lee-Hood 2013, 27)

At the completion of the *mawlid*s, the females in Bawa’s room embrace and offer *salaams* to each other, and partake of the sweet and savoury items that have been displayed in Bawa’s room; the same is also laid out in the classroom for the males as seen in Figure 2.3. After the *mawlid* it was usually time for *isa* prayers. Some went to the mosque for this, while others completed the evening prayers in Bawa’s room. The festivities and socializing commences at this moment as all gather in the meeting hall to partake in food and company.<sup>143</sup>

After *isa* prayers during *mawlid*s, there are nightly readings from Bawa’s book *a Song of Muhammad* (Muhaiyaddeen, 1996). This portion of the reading re-centers on the discourses given by Bawa on Muhammad. A female member of the Fellowship sits on stage in the meeting hall invites those present to read portions from the text. On this particular evening, the chapter that we read was on Bawa’s teachings on Aminah and Halima. The story told by Bawa focused on Halima and her search for the two-year old Muhammad whom she lost and goes in search of. From the interpretation of Bawa, the moral of the story is that we are all Halima and the Muhammad that we seek is really within us.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Each night of the *mawlid*, cooks are scheduled to be in charge of the evening meal. For instance, one night reflected the Sri Lankan disciple volunteer. She cooked yellow rice, *dhal* with spinach, cabbage curry and egg with sauce, common Tamil dishes.

<sup>144</sup> During these readings that took place during the *mawlid* festival, I was at times also asked to come up and read sections too. Of those who would go up to read, some struggled with the Arabic words in Bawa’s discourses, others with Tamil words in Bawa’s discourses and for others English was a second language and meant that they fared much better with Arabic linguistic phrases and terms. Some made sure to repeat the necessary honorifics after the

During the reading, I immediately noted the use of the different ritual languages of this particular commemorative event. The linguistic use of Arabic, Tamil, and English along with the readings of the stories of the primordial Muhammad, as found in many classical Sufi traditions, supplemented with discourses by Bawa on Muhammad, forms the liturgy that is the *mawlid* at the Fellowship. Arabic, Tamil and English and the contemporary interpretation of classical traditions signal to the very character of the Fellowship itself. Tamil is the language of Bawa and as such is viewed as a sacred language among the members of the Fellowship. Some early members of the Fellowship studied Tamil enthusiastically, so they could access Bawa directly. The same was the case for some with Arabic. Even though Bawa himself was not versed in Arabic, early members noticed that Bawa used Arabic phrases and words readily. For instance, Bawa did not lead the recitation of the *mawlid*s. He participated as those who were able to read Arabic led the *mawlid*. But he taught the *kalimah* to his followers and most importantly the *salawat*, which was praise and blessings sung to the Prophet Muhammad. Though as one member of the Fellowship indicated to me during a *mawlid* recitation, “Bawa did not speak Arabic” ultimately criticizing the Arabicization (i.e., Islamization) of the Fellowship and suggesting that the Fellowship has become more Islamic with Bawa’s passing. Still the *mawlid*s are one example of Islamic holy days that Bawa commemorated at the Fellowship, though in the early days many did not necessarily associate it as Islamic per se, but more with Bawa himself. *Mawlid*s, a long-standing Islamic tradition, are familiar to many Muslims who visit the Fellowship from Syria, Somalia, Morocco, Pakistan or Iran. They have experienced *mawlid*s in their own cultural contexts and so are readily able to connect with them in the Fellowship.

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recitation of prophetic figures, such as to the Prophet Muhammad, *salla alai wa salim* (may peace be upon him) which some in the audience joined in, others did not.

The *mawlid* brings out a more multi-ethnic Muslim (i.e., Somali, Pakistani) crowd to the Fellowship, who regularly do not participate in other Fellowship events that focus on Bawa's teachings. Members who are part of the Fellowship and do not necessarily keep five times prayers also partake in the *mawlid*, as they understand it as a practice instituted by Bawa. Therefore, their association of the *mawlid* is not with Islam, but with Bawa. It is precisely in this manner that these differently orientated members of this institution encounter one another. For instance, there are those who attend understanding the *mawlid*, and other Islamic events, such as Ramadan, as practices that Bawa taught and not necessarily associated with Islam. Other participants, especially non-Fellowship Muslim immigrants, attend because events like the *mawlids* are familiar forms of Islamic cultural and religious experiences, because of their inherited Muslim identity. With the physical passing of Bawa, it is the celebration of his death anniversary that forms another central ritual activity for the Fellowship.

#### *The Urs of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen*

The death anniversary commemoration or the *urs*<sup>145</sup> forms another central ritual at the Fellowship. I use notes from my field journal to capture my experience of this celebration:

I arrived at the Fellowship on this Saturday morning on February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2014, the death anniversary of Bawa according to the Islamic calendar. This year it fell during the *Qutb Mawlid*. The house was brimming with people. The South Asian crowd that I saw outside walking around the property when I was walking to the Fellowship was now inside. With

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<sup>145</sup> *Urs* is marriage or wedding anniversary of a Sufi saint. In Sufism it is understood as the union of the Sufi saint with God. Death is celebrated because union with God is the aspiration of all Sufis. In regions such as India and Egypt, this is a festive and holy occasion and is celebrated at the tomb or a shrine of a Sufi saint.

this group were two men, one dressed in a shiny green long *kurta* (long shirt) with bright green *kufi* (brimless cap) and pants with bells on his ankles that shook with his every step. He also donned nearly ten *tasbeehs* (rosary beads) around his neck. The females in the group wore *shalweer kameez* (consists of two items of pants with long shirt) and loosely veiled their hair, and stood beside him. The other gentleman was dressed in white long *kurta*, pants and white *kufi* and was serving the food to those who wanted it in the Fellowship meeting hall. I found out later that Ahmed, the man in the white, had cooked the food. It consisted of chickpea curry, rice and *naan* (or pita), and potato curry with toasted bread. The house was full of Fellowship people, young people who were coming from the teenager and children's meeting. Many Muslim immigrants also gathered, especially this Pakistani crowd, a group I had never seen before at the Fellowship. Those in attendance were relaxing and chatting. I found some Fellowship members that I recently met and I went and joined them. I shared with them my enthusiasm for the diverse crowd that was present today. As we chatted, this woman pointed to the man in the green outfit and in the white (Ahmed) and said to me "I have no idea who those people are, I have never seen them before and I am not even sure what their connection to this place is."

In my account above, it is the ethnic and cultural diversity of those gathered for the death anniversary celebration of Bawa that caught my immediate attention. Those who are part of the Fellowship and do not participate in the *mawlid* events or the mosque prayers come to Fellowship events such as the *urs*' of Bawa and they encounter South Asians (i.e., Pakistanis) who come to the same event to get the blessings (*baraka*) and are encountering one event from two very different perspective. One honours Bawa, a holy person they knew personally

and whose legacy is the Fellowship, their community. The other may not necessarily have had a “real” connection with Bawa but come for the “blessings,” a practice very foreign to Fellowship members. This was further noted in my field journal, as I met another disciple of Bawa who was sitting awaiting the beginning of the recitations:

Isa expressed similar sentiments as we sat watching the crowd in the hall. He expressed that the idea of coming for a blessing is a very “foreign” concept for him. When he mentioned this, I asked him why it was important for him to come from New York to visit the Fellowship this weekend for this special commemoration. He said as someone who is part of the Fellowship, this is a Fellowship community event, it was not necessarily the “blessing” of the event as much as it was an opportunity to connect with his Fellowship companions that led to his travel to Philadelphia from New York.

The concept of *baraka*, which is translated sometimes as divine power, grace or the charisma of a Sufi saint, plays an important role in Sufism, especially as Sufi saints are said to emit this grace in their death. The act of acquiring this grace emitted by Sufi holy figures, due to their proximity to God and Muhammad, is what results in the performance of pilgrimage to tombs of Sufi saints or *mazars* (tombs).<sup>146</sup> Devotees seek to access the same grace at the time of the wedding anniversary or death celebration of a Sufi saint, known as the *urs*, which is an auspicious and joyous event that commemorates the union of the Sufi saint with the divine.

The *urs* for Bawa commenced at 12:15pm. This event usually takes place at the *mazar*, which is located about one hour west of Philadelphia and the Fellowship Headquarters. At the *mazar* for *urs*, the cloth (*chaddor*) for the tomb of Bawa is changed. For the first time ever, the

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<sup>146</sup> I discuss these practices further in Chapter 3 in relation to the *mazar*.



urs ceremony was held in the Fellowship Headquarters because of an ice storm that tore through Philadelphia this wintery February that made it too dangerous to travel to the *mazar*. All the men were gathered in the *mawlid* room and they led the readings. All the women assembled in Bawa's room to listen to the recitation. They sat around Bawa's bed. The room was as packed as I have seen it thus far, as it neared close to forty people. And the meeting room was also full downstairs where the recitations were screened on the large screen. The recitations were in Arabic and began with the Qur'anic chapter *al-Fatiha*, and then with the *Ya Sin*.<sup>147</sup> *Duas* were also completed and then the recitation of shorter verses of the Qur'an.<sup>148</sup> The climactic moment of this liturgy took place as everyone stood up and sang *Engal Bawa*, a song in Tamil to honour Bawa.<sup>149</sup>

Precious Bawa, Golden One, our Sheikh of *Gnanam*, Muhaiyaddeen,

Let us meet together with love and praise as the Virtuous One.

*La ilaha ill Allahu, La ilaha ill Allahu* (there is no god but God)

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<sup>147</sup> The opening chapter of the Qur'an, the *Fatiha* (1:1-7), remains one of the most frequently invoked chapters in Islamic piety, such as during daily *salat*. It is often compared in its importance to the Lord's Prayer in Christianity. *Ya Sin* (36:1-83) on the other hand has been referred to as the "heart of the Qur'an" by some as it affirms the power of Allah the "Almighty, the Lord of Mercy" (36:6), the prophecy of Muhammad and the messengers and the message of the Qur'an and importantly it also signals the end times or the hereafter wherein judgment awaits.

<sup>148</sup> During the *urs* recitation additional chapters of the Qur'an are also recited. They include *Ad-Duha* or the *Morning Hours* (93), *Ash-Sharh* or the *Solace* (94), *At-Tin* or *The Fig* (95), *Al-'Alaq* or the *Clot* (96), *Al-Qadr* or *Power* (97), *Al-Bayyinah* or the *Clear Proof* (98), *Az-Zalzalah* or *The Earthquake* (99), *Al-'Adiyat* or the *Coursers* (100), *Al-Qari'ah* or the *Calamity* (101), *At-Takathur* or *Rivalry in Worldly Increase* (102), *Al-'asr* or *The Declining Day* (103), *Al-Humazah* or the *Traducer* (104), *Al-fil* or the *Elephant* (105), *Quraysh* or *Quraysh Tribe* (106), *Al-Ma'un* or *Small Kindness* (107), *Al-Kauthar* or *Abundance* (108), *Al-Kafirun* or *The Disbelievers* (109), *An-Nasr* or *Succour* (110), *Al-Masad* or *Palm Fiber* (111), *Al-Iklas* or *The Sincerity* (112, said three times), *Al-Falaq* or the *Daybreak* (113), *An-Nas* or *People* (114).

<sup>149</sup> Today, amidst all the changes due to the weather that made travel to the *mazar* impossible, members forgot to hand out the transliteration sheets to this Tamil song. So it was mainly the Tamil members who were singing the song, with Ahamed Kabir leading it. Everyone knew the chorus, while the main verses were sung more quietly. This song was composed by T.K.B. Rahaman (also known as Customs Rahman Thambi), who was a senior disciple of Bawa from Sri Lanka and caretaker of the Matale Branch of the Serendib Sufi Study Circle in Sri Lanka. For more please see Chapter 5's section on the *Matale Branch*. The words to the song on the handout are in Tamil, transliterated Tamil and in English. I have kept Rahaman's original translation of the English from Tamil.

*La ilaha, ill Allahu, Muhammadur-Rasulullah* (there is no god but God and Muhammad is his messenger).

As the Guru, lacking nothing, as the one complete and good,  
You show the Treasure without equal, O Sheikh of *Gnanam* (wisdom), Muhaiyaddeen

Chorus

To swim the roiling sea of birth, to cross with the *Kalimah* (word) boat,  
You're the rudder which guides us to shore, O Sheikh of *Gnanam*, Muhaiyaddeen.

Chorus

As the stag, as the doe, as the Limitless Ray of Light,  
As pure honey, as the *Deen* (religion), you're the Sheikh of *Gnanam*, Muhaiyaddeen.

Chorus

As pure gold, as precious jewels, as ruby, as pearl, and emerald,  
As jewelled light within the eye, you're mingled with effulgent light.  
Remain forever in our hearts, O Sheikh of *Gnanam* Muhaiyaddeen.

Chorus

As the grace, as the wisdom, as the Guru within wisdom,  
You're the effulgence mingled with the Guru, spreading  
Everywhere, O Allahu.

During the singing, all the women stood around Bawa's bed. I noticed that some of the females present began to cry. After this climatic moment in which singing of *Engal Bawa* was completed, everyone sat down again. Parallels can be drawn to what I noted in the standing and singing of *Ya Nabi* (O Prophet) during the *mawlid* for the Prophet Muhammad. It is the reverence and belief that their presence (i.e., the Prophet Muhammad or Bawa) is felt that the song is sung standing.

The lawyer, screenwriter and lecturer, mostly known for his role as the president of the Global Security Institute for which he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014, Jonathan Granoff,<sup>150</sup> or Ahmed Muhaiyaddeen (the name given to him by Bawa), gave a brief talk. He spoke about the legacy of Bawa and the honour of all the beings gathered this day and others who had encountered Bawa in one way or another. He stated that this encounter with Bawa requires a responsibility to continue the work of Bawa. Then, imam Miller read a chapter from *The Tree that Fell to the West* (Muhaiyaddeen 2003), this text serves as the biography of Bawa for the Fellowship. Imam Miller read the section of Bawa being a farmer, a baker and having cleaned toilets.

The conclusion of this commemoration was the singing of the full *salawat*, which aside from invoking peace for Prophet Muhammad also included blessings for Abdul Qadir Jilani, *Shaykh al-Akbar*, Muhaiyaddeen and Bawa Muhaiyaddeen. Once the commemoration was completed, all the women in Bawa's room offered each other embraces and repeated as-

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<sup>150</sup> Jonathan Granoff is a lawyer, author and advocate for legal, ethical and spiritual dimensions of human development and security. He is the President of the Global Security Institute, Senior Advisor to the ABA's Committee on Arms Control and National Security and Co-Chair of the ABA Blue Ribbon Task Force on Nuclear Non-Proliferation. He is a Senior Advisor to the Nobel Peace Laureate Summit and has served as Vice President and UN Representative of Lawyer's Alliance for World Security. Granoff met Bawa in the early 1970s and he is an active member of the Fellowship in Philadelphia, where he plays an institutional role. For more on Granoff please see Dickson's *Living Sufism in North America* (2015). Please also see Granoff's website on Global Security Institute <<http://gsinstitute.org>> (Accessed June 2, 2015).

*salamu alaykum* or “peace be upon you.” Many of the women also took a moment at Bawa’s bed, kissing it and bowed down to it in devotion. The event concluded with the sharing of food and company in the meeting hall.

These two events draw attention to the two central types of activities that take place at the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship in Philadelphia, those that include commemoration and devotion to Bawa and the study of his teachings (i.e., through discourse meetings) and those that are orientated towards the veneration of Prophet Muhammad and Abdul Qadir Jilani through *mawlid*s. For the Fellowship, the two prominent sacred figures, aside from Bawa, are the Prophet Muhammad and Abdul Qadir Jilani. In some of Bawa’s teachings, the Prophet Muhammad, Muhaiyaddeen Abdul Qadir Jilani and Allah form what he calls the “triple wisdom” or “triple gem.” It is these personages and their legacies as a manifestation of the truth of God, and as interpreted by Bawa for his community that remains central to activities that take place at the Fellowship.

In addition to the prayers that take place at the mosque and commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad and Abdul Qadir Jilani, memorialization of Bawa, especially of his words and his life events forms the parallel, if not of more importance to members of the Fellowship. It is these tendencies that as a whole represent the activities at the Fellowship; they are commemorative of Bawa and his teachings. These activities draw members of the Fellowship who participate because of Bawa or Muslims who understand these practices as Islamic rituals. The Headquarters of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship in North America still has another space of immense importance; that of Bawa’s final resting place. This space may be of even more significance to the overall North American community of Bawa’s followers. It is also the same site that has attracted new devotees to Bawa as a means to

complete pilgrimages to the tomb of a Sufi saint. It is with this sacred site that Chapter 3 engages.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter mapped the development of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Headquarters in North America. The Fellowship was initially the place of Bawa's residency, which further developed into numerous sub-spaces. In this chapter I described some of these spaces. These included daily prayers at the *masjid* of the Fellowship or weekly meetings in the Fellowship Hall and Bawa's room wherein Bawa's discourses are played and listened to. Friday *jum'ah* or Sunday discourse meetings culminated with meals, and was usually attended by all, as it was a moment to socialize with members of the community. I also presented in this chapter examples of annual events with particular Islamic origins, specifically the *mawlid*. This festive event, which includes the recitation of narratives of the metaphysical and earthly life of the Prophet Muhammad, is a central practice for the Fellowship, such a practice is also kept for the *Qutb Mawlid* for Abdul Qadir Jilani.

I explained the practice of the *urs* or the death anniversary celebration for Bawa. For this particular event, I highlighted the diverse crowd who attended. Passages of the Qur'an were recited, blessings were invoked and songs (either in Tamil or Arabic) were sung. These examples of commemorative rituals that take place at the Fellowship illustrate the rich ritual practices of the Fellowship as an everyday lived reality. It is this vibrancy of rituals that is appealing to Muslim immigrants who have experienced similar rituals in their own natal lands, while members of the Fellowship re-solidify their commitment to Bawa through their

participation in these events. It is such concurrent commemorations that help situate how diversity is maintained in the Fellowship.

To add further complexity to these already rich ritual acts as noted in the Fellowship Headquarters in Philadelphia, Chapter 3 introduces a site of immense significance, the burial tomb of Bawa. This site remains a distinct space in the landscape of Islam in America, as I noted in Chapter 1. Why has this space gained so much attention, more so than the Fellowship itself? What purpose do burial tombs (*mazar*) of saints serve? What is the significance of this site for disciples of Bawa? Who utilizes the tomb of Bawa? What activities take place at the *mazar* of Bawa? It is these questions that Chapter 3 explores.

### Chapter 3

#### At the Grave of Bawa: the Making of a *Mazar* in America

##### Introduction<sup>151</sup>

In this chapter I shift my focus from the Fellowship Headquarters in Philadelphia, which is composed of multi-dimensional sites and rituals to a space of significance not only within the Fellowship, but also within the larger landscape of North American Islam. Unlike the Fellowship Headquarters, the *mazar* (tomb shrine) of Bawa in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, is unique in that it contains the body of Bawa, who in his death has become a Sufi saint, or one who has achieved union with God. Since Sufi saints are understood to emit blessings or graces due to their proximity and intimacy with God, their places of burial are nodes in pilgrimage networks. In this chapter I situate the diverse facets of the *mazar* not only as a vital space for the Fellowship, but also as a site of pilgrimage for non-Fellowship Muslims who seek the graces of a Sufi saint, as experienced in their natal lands. Pilgrimage to Sufi tombs no longer needs to take place in regions where Islam has been historically present and is a majority religious tradition; it can now be replicated in North America.

Bawa's *mazar* is not the first of its kind in North America. Samuel Lewis, or "Sufi Sam" (d. 1971), a student of Hazrat Inayat Khan (d. 1927)<sup>152</sup> and the creator of the Dances of Universal Peace,<sup>153</sup> is understood to be the first Sufi leader buried in North America. Sufi

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<sup>151</sup> I have presented earlier versions of this chapter at conferences, such as the *Sacred Journeys Conference*, at Mansfield College at Oxford University, in Oxford, England, in July 2014. I am grateful to the participants and panelists who gave me valuable feedback on this chapter. William Rory Dickson and I have also co-authored an article on this topic, "Negotiating the Sacred in Philadelphia: Competing Sufisms at the Bawa Muhaiyadeen Shrine" (2015), which will be available in French in *Social Compass* and in English in the *Journal of Islamic Law and Culture*.

<sup>152</sup> Biographical details of Hazrat Inayat Khan may be found in Chapter 1's subsection *Historical Context of Sufism, Bawa and the Fellowship in North America*.

<sup>153</sup> Samuel Lewis, a student of Hazrat Inayat Khan and Rabia Martin, created the Dances of Universal Peace. He was initially involved with the Theosophical Society. Lewis went on to travel and study, earning titles as a teacher in Zen

Sami died in 1971 and is buried in San Cristobal, New Mexico. Currently the Lama Foundation, which maintains the authority of his *maqbara* (mausoleum), is in the process of creating a *dargah* (shrine) for his tomb.<sup>154</sup> The mystic Hazrat Shah Maghsoud (d. 1980) of the Ovesyse Gharan lineage from Iran is also buried in a cemetery in Novato, California, where there is a memorial for him.<sup>155</sup> Burials of Sufi leaders are developing across America, but no research has been completed specifically on the significance of these spaces in relation to Islam and Sufism in North America. I hope what follows below on Bawa's shrine signals the need for such research in order to understand the diversity of Islam and Sufism in North America. The *mazar* and its varying interpretations and ritual use add further nuance to the complexities of the Fellowship, especially as experienced through movement in and around sacred spaces. As such, through the engagement of the members of the Fellowship and the sacred spaces that form the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship in Philadelphia and Coatesville, it is evident that though plurality is prevalent, the maintenance of this pluralism within one movement is not without negotiation.

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Buddhism and Bhakti yogi. He eventually returned to America and taught "hippies" or the spiritual seekers in the San Francisco Bay area and began his work as a peace activist through the use of Sufism, and especially through dance, leading to the formation of the Dances of Universal Peace.

<sup>154</sup> Tombs of Sufi saints are usually called a *mazar* (shrine), though the names given to them may vary according to its cultural contexts. For instance, tombs may be called a *dargah* (court or doorway) and *zawiyah* or *maqam* in Arabic.

<sup>155</sup> His daughter, Seyyedeh Dr. Nahid Angha, is the founder of International Association of Sufism, which maintains his legacy. Dr. Angha is a human rights activist, womens' rights activist and Sufi leader and scholar in her own right, which is evident in her roles as the co-director and co-founder of International Sufi Women Organization. She is also the organizer of the yearly Sufism Symposium and Songs of the Soul: Poetry and Sacred Music Festival. She has authored and translated many books including *The Journey Seyr Va Soluk* (1991) and *Principles of Sufism* (1991).



### Visitation to *Mazars* in Sufism

One of the markers within Sufism is the authority of a saint and his/her *baraka*, or blessings, that is imparted through their proximity to the Prophet Muhammad, but in essence to the ultimate source, Allah. The blessing sought by a devotee who approaches a shrine is based on the understanding that he/she is partaking of the grace from the union achieved by the saint with God (Werbner 2003; Ho 2006; Kugle 2007).<sup>156</sup> Saints are also the epicenter of ritual performances, as they “shape and reshape a sacred landscape; in embodying the sacred as lived reality they create and extend new Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqa*)” (Werbner and Basu 1998, 3). This practice exists because saints supplicate prayers on behalf of the adherent or devotee (Pemberton 2004, 2). This can be compared to approaching an “inaccessible emperor” by way of his ministers or, in this case, the saints and thus “transposing them into a devotional setting, in which one could approach a transcendent God through immanent mediators who have been granted intimate proximity to the divine” (Kugle 2007, 47). It is due to the intermediary capacity of Sufi saints, that communities of veneration have formed in the living presence of saints but have solidified in their death through their burial tombs, which become centers of pilgrimages.

Nile Green<sup>157</sup> explains that shrine cults that are the focus of pilgrimage can be found in Sunnism, Twelver Shiism and Ismaili Shiism:

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<sup>156</sup> For more on pilgrimages to Sufi shrines in Islam, please see Pnina Werbner, *Pilgrims of Love: Anthropology of a Global Sufi Cult* (Indiana: Indiana University Press 2003), Scott Kugle, *Sufis and Saint's Bodies: Mysticism, Corporeality, and the Sacred Power in Islam* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press 2007) and *The Graves of Tarim* (California: University of California Press 2006) by Engseng Ho.

<sup>157</sup> Nile Green is a Professor at University of California, Los Angeles in the Department of History. His area of study includes South Asia and Islam. He looks particularly at Muslims in global history especially in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia and interactions of Muslims with non-Muslims, as well as Sufism across the Indian Ocean. He has published extensively on the history of Sufism, including *Sufism: A Global History* (2012) and *Indian Sufism since the Seventeenth Century: Saints, Books and Empires in the Muslim Deccan* (2006).

Through their promises of miracle and grace, shrine cults possess a kind of capital, however symbolic, that may be claimed by or divided among different groups of pilgrims. As with any other assets, the rights of ownership or privileged access to the powers of the cult figure are also at times a matter of dispute (Green 2007, 196).

A saint's shrine, then, is "a place where [the saint] has preached and breathed his last, and the tomb built after his death is venerated as a sacred place" and as such is thought to contain a powerful field of blessings, or *baraka* (Bhardwaj 1998). Pilgrimages to these sites are known as *ziyara*. For some Muslims, non-obligatory pilgrimages, or *ziyara*, are contrasted to the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca, or *haji*. Some within the Muslim world view *ziyara* to be theologically antagonistic, as it associates partners to God (*shirk*) and stains the principle of one God (monotheism). Despite such contentions, praying, meditating and celebrating at *mazars* forms an important and in some cases central part of Muslim life in as varied contexts as South, East and Central Asia, the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa (Bhardwaj 1998). In Sufi parlance graves of Sufi saints are understood as being transformative. Kelly Pemberton<sup>158</sup> captures this in her own study of Sufi shrines in South Asia, when she writes

[T]hese shrines are spoken as integrators-patronized by people from all classes, creeds, and religious communities, while serving as spiritual and material needs of local pilgrims as well as those who come from afar- they also stand at a nexus of contradictions surrounding the visitation of shrines and veneration of *pirs* [shaykhs] (2004, 1).

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<sup>158</sup> Kelly Pemberton is an Associate Professor of Religion and Women's studies at Colombian College of Arts & Sciences in Washington, DC. Her areas of research include Islam, Hinduism, Sufism, Gender and Civil Society, especially in South Asia. This is reflected in her book *Women Mystics and Sufi Shrines in the Indian Subcontinent* (2010). For more information please see Pemberton's personal website <http://home.gwu.edu/~kpembert/> (Accessed May 7, 2015).

Engseng Ho's (2006)<sup>159</sup> explains that graves [...] lie within circuits of movements [...] People move for many reasons; their itineraries are numerous and so are the durations of travel (2006, 7). Ho adds "the grave is a semiotic complex that enacts a passage from silence to vocalization. This initial motion begins a dynamic of signification that launches the dead and silent person within the earth into discourse" (2006, 190). It is this "semiotic complex" that is the central point of analysis in this chapter, a complex that not only elicits a relation with the "dead" (i.e., Bawa), but also between those who gather around the dead. Through it all though it is the "dead" that remains of significance. Ho states further:

A pilgrimage is a return to a place. Each return is different because of the events of each journey away and back are different. Each pilgrim brings new experiences to a place [...]. They are better approached as places of increase. While tombstones are mostly signs of absence, and mostly silent at times of pilgrimage they are noisy with the sounds of many presences. Movement makes all the difference. We cannot understand the grave, the destination, without paying attention to the journey behind it (Ho 2006, 7-8).

The journeys of different pilgrims and devotees who visit the tomb provide moments of diversity but also productive tensions in the study of sacred spaces. It is because of the diversity associated with pilgrimage and sacred spaces connected with it that scholars have found *mazars* critical spaces as a means to engage with Sufi communities (Green 2007). As

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<sup>159</sup> Engseng Ho is a Professor of Cultural Anthropology and History and affiliated with the Duke Islamic Studies Center at Duke University. His areas of research are in global transnational history, race and ethnicity, comparative colonial studies, with regional interests in Africa, Middle East, Asia. In his study, he explores the "travel" and "mobility" of a dispersed people in relation to the region of Hadramawt in present-day Yemen. The itineraries of these peoples across the Indian Ocean are centered on graves of Muslim holy persons.

Green explains the shrine as a “three-dimensional” space welcomes “re-interpretation” by the varying participants who utilize it. As communities of Muslims and non-Muslims complete pilgrimages to Bawa’s shrine in Coatesville members of the Fellowship are also negotiating the presence of new visitors to the *mazar*, who come for the blessing of a Sufi saint and in doing so introduce their own ritual practices. One noticeable example of this negotiation is seen in the sign posted on the doors to the *mazar* by the Fellowship caretakers who are trying to maintain a simple sacred site with no ritual accoutrements, which is captured in the photograph in Figure 3.2. This chapter highlights my encounters with members and pilgrims who visit Bawa’s *mazar* in Coatesville. By drawing attention to the narratives of the pilgrims and the Fellowship members, I aim to illuminate not only the creation of a Sufi pilgrimage practice in North America, but also the negotiations of diverse Islamic, Sufi and spiritual identities as it is unfolding within this pilgrimage practice at the *mazar* of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen.

### **The *Mazar* of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen in Coatesville**

After the construction of the *masjid* Bawa’s health had diminished drastically. In most of his teachings given during the last months of 1986, Bawa discoursed laying down in a hospital bed in Philadelphia with an oxygen mask grasping for breath while reminding his disciples of humanity’s duty to return to unity with the God. With his passing on December 8, 1986, Bawa was given an Islamic burial, as all members of the Fellowship are. He was buried on the plot purchased by the Fellowship in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, an hour west of Philadelphia, which now comprises over a hundred acres in property captured in the photograph in Figure 3.1. After he was buried members of the Fellowship constructed a shrine for his tomb. This

space is a site of remembrance of Bawa for his immediate students. The *mazar* was the final addition to an already existing cemetery for members of the Fellowship, which also included a garden project and a center where meetings are held. Some members of the Fellowship have subsequently moved to be near the *mazar* and have their own weekly activities that parallel activities in Philadelphia and so they have formed a branch in Coatesville. The *mazar* is a significant space within this larger complex.



Figure 3.1: The *mazar* of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen in Coatesville, Pennsylvania. Photograph taken by author, July 2012.

Eleanor Daly Finnegan (2011) in her doctoral dissertation explores American Sufi Muslim communities and religious farms as a means to understand “embodiment” and “interpretation” in the “creation of religious and environmental beliefs and practices” (10).<sup>160</sup> To do this she studies three American Sufi communities, which include the Dayemi Tariqat and the Dayempur Farm in Illinois and the Shadhiliyya Sufi Centre East and the Farm of Peace in Warfordsburg, Pennsylvania and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship Farm. She argues that “[...] by being involved with these religious farms, they are doing nothing less than crafting unique ways of being Muslim in the United States, based on their identity as converts to a particular form of Islam” (Finnegan 2011, 11). When exploring the location and the landscape of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Farm, Finnegan writes:

[...] having rural communities provides these Muslims with unique spaces on the American religious landscape. These spaces are usual [sic] outside of spaces with large Muslim populations, making them freer in some ways from the influence of other Muslims. However this also makes these communities unique within their rural setting (2011, 99).

As Finnegan captures in her dissertation and as members of the Fellowship relayed to me during my fieldwork, the farm property was purchased when a Fellowship member died. Bawa was dismayed at the cost of burying people in America. So with Bawa’s prompting, members of the Fellowship collected money and purchased the property to serve as a

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<sup>160</sup> Eleanor Daly Finnegan is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Religious Studies and the Department of History at the University of Alabama. She has written extensively on religion and ecology, especially through Islam and farming in North America. More on her work can be accessed on her personal website: <http://www.eleanorfinnegan.com> (Accessed October 19, 2014).

cemetery for its community. This property was purchased on September 18, 1980. At the time the property was only fifty-eight acres, but currently it is just over a hundred acres and consists of a cemetery for the Fellowship members, a farm, a garden and a wisdom center, which is the site of weekend discourse meetings and meals. It was Kabir who informed Bawa about the property in Coatesville, because he had known that Bawa was looking for a cemetery.<sup>161</sup>

It is this property that later incorporated a small horticultural project, both a flower garden and a fruit and vegetable garden. The property also led to the creation of the Unionville Branch of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship formed in 1982 while Bawa was in Sri Lanka, which was a branch of the Fellowship in Coatesville.<sup>162</sup> These members became more active in helping the farm project but also participated in their own meetings, that ran parallel to meetings in Philadelphia. As Finnegan points out, for these members the farm life formed the center of their service and relationship to Bawa and the Fellowship (2011, 123). According to Finnegan in the summer of 2009, the branch included about twelve families with an estimated thirty to forty members. She was also told in 2010 that about twenty to twenty-two families lived within a fifteen mile radius of the farm, and most of these members moved to the farm after Bawa's passing (Finnegan 2011, 124).

Shortly after Bawa's death, the members of the Fellowship decided to commemorate their teacher with the building of a *mazar*, which was designed by the artist Michael Green, a

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<sup>161</sup> Kabir asked me to use the name given by Bawa to him. Interview with author, Bawa Muhaiyaddeen *Mazar*, Coatesville, Pennsylvania, April 21, 2014.

<sup>162</sup> Coatesville is a city in Chester County, Pennsylvania and is about thirty-nine miles west of Philadelphia. The branch is also known as Unionville, the name of the unincorporated community in the region.

disciple of Bawa.<sup>163</sup> The building of the *mazar*, unlike the building of *masjid*, was a project that virtually everyone who was part of the Fellowship actively helped to construct. As Kabir explained to me during our interview which took place outside the *mazar*:

That was another very incredibly beautiful experience in a way different and beautiful in a different way in that all the children came. Not all the children of Bawa's family came to help in the mosque, some people didn't feel that they wanted to help or weren't able to. But when we built this, everybody showed up. Mrs. G was stuccoing, you know, and Amin was stuccoing. And Gnainar and Araby, they were all working on this and Dr. G, you know. Everybody took part of it and even in the top, around the perimeter there is, you see the little ledge that sticks out on the top [pointing to *mazar* behind us], the little cap on the corners that you can see sticking out a little bit? [...] That was the roof that was poured on top of the walls and on top of the walls, written in the top of the concrete, before it dried, all of the children [disciples] were brought up to write little notes to Bawa all along the perimeter [...]. It was so much, you know, love and yearning and sadness but it was like reconnecting in a certain way. This was something that everyone could get together and do with their father [...] was to build this place to protect this grave.<sup>164</sup>

Kabir's comments are poignant, as the efforts to build a tomb to honour Bawa's legacy, as a teacher and father, brought his disciples together for a purpose, at least momentarily.

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<sup>163</sup> Michael Green is an artist and illustrator. He has worked extensively with the American poet Coleman Barks. Barks taught poetry and creative writing at the University of Georgia for thirty years. It was their meeting of Bawa and their shared devotion to him that led to their collaborative projects. Together they have published popular renditions of the Sufi poet Jalal ad-Din Rumi (d. 1273). These best-selling works have included *The Illuminated Rumi* (1997) and *One Song* (2005). He has also published *The Illuminated Prayer: The Five-Times Prayer of the Sufis* (2000) with Coleman Barks, which was inspired by the teachings of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen.

<sup>164</sup> Interview with author, Bawa Muhaiyaddeen *Mazar*, Coatesville, Pennsylvania, April 21, 2014.



Though Finnegan explores specifically the farm of the Fellowship and rightly captures the transitions that the farm space has broadly experienced (i.e., from cemetery to farming to burial shrine). Her understanding of the current property is that of “a park and a place of pilgrimage” which shifted the “private farm” to a “public place” (Finnegan 2011, 119, 131). Finnegan briefly mentions pilgrims, such as having over “five or six hundred Gujarati Muslims from New York, New Jersey, Boston, Connecticut, and Canada come to the farm” (Ibid.). Below I speak more to the pilgrims who are visiting the now public space of the Bawa *mazar*, as pilgrimages to this site are not yet fully documented.

*At the Grave of their Shaykh: the Fellowship’s Mazar*

The *mazar* in Coatesville is a central site of veneration for members of the Fellowship. On Sunday mornings members have “Wisdom Meetings” at the welcome center. Bawa’s discourse, in the format of a video or an audio recording, is played and is followed by an informal lunch. This meal is always vegetarian (to keep with the teachings of Bawa) and is usually some kind of South Asian cuisine.<sup>165</sup> These meetings and luncheons are open to everyone. At the *mazar* daily *dhikr* (remembrance), takes place in the mornings at 4:30am (similar to the mosque in Philadelphia) and depending on the time of the year, *fajr* (dawn prayers) are also completed, before, in between or after *dhikr*. Members also perform *salat* (prayers) outside in a pavilion across from the *mazar*. The *mazar* is also a site where the *mawlid* (birthday) for the Prophet Muhammad and Abdul Qadir Jilani are celebrated. These commemorations begin with the raising of the flag and end with its lowering, as instructed by

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<sup>165</sup> During my visits I have eaten *biryani* (mixed rice), *rotis* (pita), *dhal* (lentils) curry, potato curry and *kanji*, a traditional Sri Lankan rice soup, a favourite of Bawa.

Bawa. Those who live close to the *mazar* complete these rituals concurrently with the *mawlid* ceremonies that take place in Philadelphia.

The *mazar* is the location of Bawa's own 'urs (death) anniversary, which takes place annually on the day of his death according to the Islamic calendar, while December 8<sup>th</sup> is the day when the death anniversary is commemorated according to the Julian calendar. Other milestones of Bawa's life are also honored at the *mazar*. For example on the forty-second anniversary of Bawa's arrival to Philadelphia on October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013, not only did members participate in discourse meetings and events at the Fellowship House in Philadelphia, but on Sunday morning, members from the Toronto and Boston branches and members of the Philadelphia community participated in a prayer service at the *mazar*. The Tamil song *Engal Bawa* (Our Bawa) was sung, prayers were recited in Arabic (*Surah ya Sin*) and the names of the members buried at the cemetery, starting with the name of Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, were read out. The latter highlights another purpose of the *mazar* and farm property; it is a cemetery for deceased members of the Fellowship and it continues to serve as such. Members of the Fellowship, who have died elsewhere in the world, such as in Europe or Canada, at times also request to be buried in the cemetery of the Fellowship.<sup>166</sup> Members in Philadelphia and in Coatesville Branch, who are available, complete the proper Islamic burial practices, as taught by Bawa. So many come to visit the graves of their families and friends.

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<sup>166</sup> This practice of burial *ad sanctos* or being buried near sacred places, such as tombs of holy figures is seen across religious traditions, such as in Christianity or Buddhism (Schopen 1987). In Islam, there are some evidences of this, though it has not been thoroughly explored in scholarship to my knowledge. One of the challenges of this type of burial practice in Islam is that burial of the dead needs to take place soon after death, usually within twenty-four hours. As such, the time that it might take to move the body to the desired location (i.e., near a saint's shrine) may not be possible, though this is not to say that this has not happened. Examples are seen in the burial of royalty, such as the Mughal emperors and family members in South Asia, near shrines of Chishti Sufi saints. This practice is also evident at the Fellowship *mazar*. In my time at the *mazar*, I did hear pilgrims ask Fellowship caretakers how one can secure a burial plot at the *mazar*. Fellowship caretakers often express to visitors that they must be members of the Fellowship to be able to be buried at the cemetery near Bawa's *mazar*.

With Bawa's instruction a piping system to extract water from beneath the ground was constructed. Imam Miller, the head imam of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Mosque, explained that he and his wife, along with many others at the Fellowship only drink water from the farm near the *mazar*, as instructed by Bawa. They often bring empty water jugs to refill water and keep at their home. Many of the members of the Fellowship whom I spoke to believe that the water from the *mazar* is linked with the water in the well of Mankumban in Sri Lanka, both of which are connected to the ultimate source, the well of Zamzam in Mecca. As such, this water is thought to contain healing properties.

Members of the Fellowship from Toronto to members in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, to those who live in England visit Bawa's *mazar* regularly to honour his memory. Shoaib, a Muslim devotee from Pakistan, who works in Saudi Arabia, visits Toronto and Philadelphia regularly. He explained his reasons for visiting Bawa's *mazar* both in Sri Lanka and Philadelphia:

It is an important question, a lot of people ask that, why do you go to a *mazar* okay? [...] If God is everywhere, why do you have to go anywhere? That's true, but as I said, we have not yet reached that ourselves have not reached that level like the prophets, like Muhammad, like Jesus, like Moses, like Abraham was, who themselves changed into light form and God took them in, we are still on the journey, we still have to realize ourselves, we are aware we have not realized, okay, until you realize yourself, you need these things, in life to keep you straight [...]. It is the love and devotion to Bawa [...] that we think it is important to go and reaffirm our commitment to him [...]. It's not that if you don't go he

is going to abandon us, no he won't. Bawa is looking after you even when you don't know him.<sup>167</sup>

Shoaib relays above that it is the “love and devotion to Bawa” that prompts him to travel transnationally to visit Bawa's shrine. It is not obligatory, but it is an affirmation of a relationship with Bawa. When I asked Shoaib about the experience of visiting the *mazar* of Bawa in Coatesville and of Mankumban, a shrine built by Bawa to honour Maryam in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, he explained what the process entailed for him personally:

So when you go in front of a divine presence, and to me, you know Bawa Muhaiyaddeen and so is Mother Mary okay they are part of God. They are part of the divine light okay, whether they are physically there or not there is not important to me but that place symbolizes them. So when I am there, just as I would be in Mecca for example, or when I go to Medina where the Prophet is kept right, to me it is as sacred as that, because there is a lot of divine presence [...] and there I see myself not as the world sees me, but as I am. And there I am in front of the divine with all my frailties, so emotionally it is a very you know weak state you are in, and you know you can't hide anything, you are open, you're like a naked baby, right, in front of the ultimate power and then you feel how small you are [...] yet you have been given the occasion to be there. So you think of your unworthiness and you think of the great blessings you have been given.<sup>168</sup>

Shoaib states that although he is successful in his life, when he arrives in “front of the divine” which is made possible with spaces like the *mazar*, he feels as though he is a “naked baby”

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<sup>167</sup> Shoaib, interview with author, Bay and Bloor Plaza, in downtown Toronto, Canada. October 9th, 2013.

<sup>168</sup> Shoaib, interview with author, Bay and Bloor Plaza, in downtown Toronto, Canada. October 9th, 2013.

standing in the presence of the “ultimate power.” It is the ability to experience this proximity to the divine that is made possible by the *mazar* because it holds the remains of a Sufi saint, who channels this power through his/her legacy.

For others, such as Nur Kabira, the experience is based on who Bawa is. Nur Kabira came to the Toronto Fellowship through her connections with the lawyer Wilhelm George Poolman, who was the president of the Toronto Branch of the Fellowship before he passed away in 2009.<sup>169</sup> Poolman introduced Bawa to some of these early Iranian immigrants who have now been instrumental to the growth of the Fellowship in Toronto. Nur Kabira, an Iranian-Canadian member of the Fellowship, is one such individual who came to the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship in Toronto through Poolman and his connections with the Jerrahi Order.<sup>170</sup> Nur Kabira explained this during my interview with her at the Toronto Fellowship:

To the Fellowship actually, I came through a friend who was friend [*sic*] with Wilhem Poolman, who was the you know first person in Toronto who really put his soul and effort to make his house as a Fellowship and you know welcome people and introduce

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<sup>169</sup> Poolman was born in Indonesia in August 21, 1923 and moved to the Netherlands at the age of eight. He avoided being drafted to work in the Nazi work camps by hiding on farms, while his father was killed in a Japanese Prisoner of War camp. He came to Canada in 1951 and studied law at Osgoode Hall Law School at York University and was a practicing lawyer until his death, when he was buried in the Fellowship cemetery near Bawa's *mazar*. It was his encounter with Bawa Muhaiyaddeen that led to his home in Forest Hill region of Toronto, formerly a house of students studying with Vilayat Inayat Khan (d. 2004), the son of Hazrat Inayat Khan, to be changed into the headquarters of the Toronto Fellowship Branch, the first Canadian Branch in Canada. Poolman had close connections with the New Canadian Sufi Cultural Centre, a branch of the Halveti-Jerrahi Order of Dervishes (based in New York) and developed under Tosun Bayrak and his teacher Ozak, who met and formed a close relationship with Bawa in Philadelphia. The Jerrahi Order of Toronto attracted many Iranians who immigrated to Toronto in the early 1990s. Poolman often invited these members to the Toronto Fellowship meetings and these Iranian immigrants form a central demographic in the Toronto Branch. Poolman's death obituary can be found in *The Globe and Mail* newspaper: <http://v1.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/Deaths.20090611.93198526/BDAStory/BDA/deaths> (Accessed October 19, 2014).

<sup>170</sup> On their website, they are advertised as a “traditional Sufi order” (Jerrahi, 2014). The community is predominately Turkish, however in recent years it has diversified to include East African Indians and South Asians. Meetings are held weekly on Saturday evenings. They include *salat*, dinner, and a talk given by the *shaykh* and include traditional Turkish music and Turkish tea. The evening culminates in gender-separated *dhikr*. For more on the community, please visit their website at <http://www.jerrahi.ca/aboutus.html> (Accessed August 12, 2014).

Bawa Muhaiyaddeen to everybody. So I just got invited one day and they said you know it's a nice place, you can go. And I just went like that; like you know sometimes you are interested to go to places that is [*sic*] spiritual, that's how I just came to the Fellowship.

For Nur Kabira visits to Philadelphia are a regular part of her connection to Bawa, who she did not physically meet. Thus places like the *mazar* are significant for her not only because it entombs Bawa, but also more importantly what that connection to Bawa evokes for her:

Nur Kabira: And you know when I come to Fellowship here, when I go to *mazar*, its like you know the explanation of paradise; they say paradise is a peaceful place; it's all the beauty. Actually this time we went we were sitting until evening because it was such a power of peace and beauty [...] you know because even beauty, the translation of beauty at this time is like they change everything to the form of the mind that they create [...], design something, even nature everything touched [by] it becomes a form of desire of human being. But if you go there and if I say [to] you these things, you might think I am crazy there is nothing there, its just trees and a place that people come and meditate, and nothing else, and a small kitchen that they serve you know food or tea for people. But when you go there, when I go there and I just sit in a corner, and I just feel that I am in heaven, that energy you cannot explain it you just have to experience it.

S: And that energy, it is because of Bawa's energy?

Nur Kabira: Because, this body you know Bawa says is like a garbage bag, what is within that, which is that fruit, that is the power of the human being, which is the highest being that God created so that remains, that power remains.<sup>171</sup>

For Nur Kabira, it is because Bawa transcended his physicality and overcame the limitation of his body, or the “garbage bag”, that he became fully human. His station of true humanity as the *insan al-kamil* (the perfected being) was the goal of God.<sup>172</sup> So it is because of Bawa’s state as a full and perfected human being that his power (*baraka*) remains at the *mazar*. This presence evokes states of peace and beauty in Nur Kabira when she spends time in prayer at the *mazar*.

For Nur Sharon Marcus, an Executive Member of the Toronto Fellowship Branch, there is a tangible connection between the *mazar* in Coatesville and the shrine in Mankumban. Travelling throughout Sri Lanka I found photographs of Bawa’s *mazar* at his *ashram* (house) in Jaffna, to the makeshift hut that served as a shrine in war-torn Puliyanikulam, to the shrine in Colombo, which is based in a patron’s home and is the center of the Serendib Sufi Study Circle. In Toronto, the photograph of Bawa’s *mazar* is framed at the entrance of the door to Bawa’s house where weekly discourse meetings, *dhikrs* and communal gatherings take place. The *mazar* in Pennsylvania, then, is a sacred space that connects numerous places associated with Bawa across Sri Lanka and North America. For Nur Sharon Marcus, this connection is established by the water source found at both sites.

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<sup>171</sup> Nur Kabira, interview with author, Toronto, Canada the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship Branch of Toronto. November 3, 2013.

<sup>172</sup> The topic of *Insan Kamil* is further discussed in Chapter 7, in the subsection *Bawa as the Insan Kamil*.

[...T]he *mazar* in Mankumban was intended to be his burial place and that is now said to be the burial place of Mary, of Maryam, and Bawa has confirmed that that she is there [...]. The other thing was the well now you've been there so you've tasted the water from that well, Bawa often uses the word *nalla tannir* [good water] as a place name, sweet water is what we would translate that in English and sweet water is a place name in some places in North America. I have to say that the water at the well near his *mazar*, at his *mazar*, in Fallowfield Township [Coatesville], which is that forty miles location west of Philly, the water in that well is extraordinary and pure and delicious. The water at the well in Mankumban was the sweetest, the most extraordinary taste that I have ever tasted not just for water but for any liquid form of anything. I mean and Bawa has said there is a very subtle underground connection between the Zamzam well in Saudi and the well in Mankumban. Well I've tasted the Zamzam water from Saudi and its always come in plastic which maybe has changed the taste somewhat, but I have never tasted anything to compare with that exquisite water from that huge huge well at Mankumban.<sup>173</sup>

In Nur Sharon Marcus's comments above she draws parallels between the three-shrine complexes (1) *mazar* and (2) Mankumban with the (3) Zamzam in Mecca all through water. Water is a significant element and symbol in Islam. It is used for "ritual ablutions, found and revered in the Well of Zamzam at Mecca and will be enjoyed by the Blessed in Paradise with its four rivers, springs or fountains" (Netton 2000, 7).<sup>174</sup> For Nur Sharon Marcus, she draws

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<sup>173</sup> Nur Sharon Marcus, interview with author at interviewee's home. Toronto, Canada. October 10, 2013.

<sup>174</sup> The Well of Zamzam in Mecca is significant in Islam and for Muslims. According to Qur'anic tradition, when Hagar, the second-wife of Abraham, was looking for water for her newborn son Ismail, she ran between Marwa and Safa looking for water for her dehydrated child, until God created for her a spring to quench the baby's thirst. This act of running between the two mounts is repeated during the *hajj* pilgrimage. The well is part of the larger complex of the shrine of Ka'ba and the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, Saudi Arabia.



the tangible connection experienced through the taste of water at both locations with the water she tasted from the Well of Zamzam. The experience of water at the well of these locations confirms for Nur Sharon Marcus the “extraordinary” connections of the shrines that span the three separate continents. Thus the shared experience of taste is ultimately metaphysical and like Shoaib, connects to the established sacred site of Zamzam in Mecca.

For members of the Fellowship, such as for Shoaib, Nur Kabira and Nur Sharon Marcus, the *mazar* in Coatesville has varying significances for them individually. For Shoaib and Nur Sharon Marcus, the *mazar* and Mankumban are main nodes in the larger network of the Fellowship, the complete linkage of which is only notable when these sanctified and affiliated spaces are seen as portals to the presence of God, as explained by Shoaib in his experience. This access to the presence of God is determined by Bawa’s presence, which for Nur Kabira, is dependent on his transcending his physicality and having become a complete human being (*insan al-kamil*), resulting in his special proximity and intimacy with God. From being a node that connects to Mankumban in Sri Lanka to other sacred spaces such as Mecca and the Well of Zamzam the shrine in Coatesville serves many purposes. For the members of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, it is an important sacred space for weekly ritual performances of *dhikr*, wisdom teachings, celebrations of Muslim holy days and a resting place for the deceased members of the Fellowship. Upon entering this sacred space not only is reunion through remembrance made possible with their ever-present Bawa, but it also creates pathways to the divine through recollection of unity from Philadelphia to Mankumban to Mecca. The latter only captures one purpose of the *mazar*; the other perspective that also needs attention is the *mazar*’s utilization by new visitors.

*The “Picnic Mazar”- Visitors to the Mazar of Bawa-ji*

Throughout my fieldwork in Philadelphia, I spent many days and weekends at the *mazar*. During this time I conducted formal interviews with members of the Fellowship who live near the farm and participated in meetings, but I also found opportunities to engage with first-time and regular non-Fellowship visitors to the *mazar*. I did this to understand how they learned about the *mazar*, their perceptions of Bawa and their reasons for visiting. In this section I use field notes to articulate my engagement with these diverse pilgrims at the *mazar*.



Figure 3.2: Signs readings “this *Mazaar* [sic] is for SILENT prayer and reflection. Please be respectful of other visitors” and “No burning of Incense or eating of food inside the *Mazaar* [sic]” at the doors of the *mazar*. Photograph taken by the author, February 2014.

For instance, when I was present at the *mazar* for the Easter long weekend in April 2014, there were flocks of pilgrims who were coming as groups of families and friends. They brought food, such as rice, curries, Indian sweets, donuts (i.e., Dunkin Donuts), while being mindful of the no-meat rule practiced by the Fellowship, as taught by Bawa. For first time visitors, especially those who came with friends and families who visit the *mazar* regularly, the no-meat rule remains a point of confusion, as vegetarianism is not required by Islamic law. One time I found myself sitting with a member of the Fellowship from the Boston Branch, who brought his mother who lives in England to the *mazar* for the first time. She was confused about the no-meat on the property rule and her son patiently tried to explain to his mother that the *shaykh* did not eat meat. The mother still looked unsure of the practice at the end of the conversation.

Visitors usually placed their food items on the designated table in the welcome center and took some food to eat and socialize with their companions outside or inside, depending on the space that was available and the weather. At the end of each day, Fellowship volunteers clean up the kitchen and social space, after the visitors to the *mazar* have left. The visiting families also bring their children, who run around the property (sometimes very loudly), some play on the playscape, others frolick or walk through the garden and the fields freely. Most of the visiting pilgrims also bring empty water jugs and bottles to fill from the water pump. They also use the water for drinking purposes while on the property. I also noticed pilgrims performing *salat* in small nooks, either in the welcome center or outside if it was a warm day.

On Saturday April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2014, I met Persian women from Washington DC and Punjabi-speaking Pakistani women from New Jersey and from New York State, while South Indian family from the Boston Branch also arrived, and brought with them their mother who was

visiting from England. Most of the women were in *chadors* (full-body length open cloak) or other traditional South Asian outfits. Some also wore casual clothing with loosely veiled headscarves or a *hijab* (hair covering). Men were in traditional Islamic dress, *kufis* (brimless cap) or in jeans. These visitors established their own ritual protocol at the *mazar*. Signs for specific protocols are posted at the entrance to the *mazar* and in the welcome center (as seen in Figure 3.2) by the Fellowship caretakers. But there is no one present regularly supervising or tending to the pilgrims on a daily basis, especially inside the *mazar*. To highlight some of the ritual activities that took place by the visiting non-Fellowship members, I use portions of my fieldnotes to describe what took place in the *mazar* on this Saturday afternoon in April.

A group of Pakistani men, two older men and four young boys had come in. They went and sat in front of the tomb. One had two plastic bags with two sweet boxes inside them. And he put it right against the edge of the tomb, making sure the bag was touching the tomb. And they all sat with their hands held out open in prayer. He began with “*A’udhu billahi min ash-shaytaan ar-rajeem*” [I seek Allah’s protection from the accursed Satan] he repeated it twice. He also took photographs of the tomb, and of his company praying. Two other younger men also came and they walked around, looked at the pamphlets on the bookshelf, prayed and left. Another young man that I saw later also came and he prayed. I have seen him around and I saw him on Monday talking to one of the Fellowship members, asking how to join the Fellowship and what he needed to do. After the Pakistani man finished his prayers, he asked his young boys to get up and touch the tomb and he took photographs of them. He took several photographs and videos on his iPhone. Then he opened the box of sweets and he offered them to everyone in the *mazar*,

first to the young boys who were walking out and one of the boys said that he did not want one, and the other one said “no you can’t say no you must take one” and he finally took one. I was sitting against the wall with my hair loosely covered and he walked over to me offered me *salams* and said “please sister take” and I took one. They were *ladoos* (yellow sweet sugar balls) and a cashew-sweet, both traditional Indian sweets. I stayed in the *mazar* for a bit longer and observed as each individual who came in, mainly pilgrims, performed his or her own personal meditation and prayer. Once I was outside, I scanned the areas around the *mazar*, and many were having picnics outside the *mazar* near the welcome center, the garden area and the benches.

The majority of the visitors that day were South Asian Muslims, mainly Pakistani, Gujarati and Punjabi Muslims. Throughout the day I noticed that some women did not go into the *mazar* at all. I saw women standing outside on the footpath and grass praying. There could be many reasons for this, be it concerns of purity (i.e., being on their menses) or because of their



Figure 3.3: A member of the Toronto Fellowship Branch visiting the *mazar* of Bawa Muhaideen during the *Qutb Mawlid* Abdul Qadir Jilani. Photograph taken by author, February 2014.

particular understandings of *mazar* practices as defined by their own local contexts.

This idea of the *mazar* and the farm being a “picnic *mazar*” is a practice that some members of the Fellowship are finding difficult to adjust to, mostly because of the noise and informal etiquette set by the pilgrims that disturbs the otherwise quiet and simple space. Pilgrims who come to the *mazar* are coming for the tomb of Bawa. Once inside, as noted above, each visitor sets his or her own protocol that usually consists of private prayer and meditation, that sometimes includes prostrations. Pilgrims visit individually, but also as groups of extended families and friends. They also may sit together and may perform a *dua* (intercessory prayers). Women congregate together inside the *mazar*, while other female pilgrims do not enter the *mazar* at all.

Visitors also try to maintain the practice of silent meditation inside the *mazar*, though Fellowship members relayed many incidences in which music or singing took place inside the *mazar*. One time Kabir, who works regularly on the farm property, heard singing coming from the *mazar*. Displeased with the music, he rushed over to the *mazar* to remind the visitors that the space was only for quiet meditation. Once he arrived inside the *mazar*, he found the group in the middle of singing the *salawat* to the Prophet Muhammad, and so he was unable to follow through on his initial intention of asking them to stop and joined them in singing the *salawat*, which he explained with a smile on his face.<sup>175</sup>

As Uzma Rehman<sup>176</sup> writes, “Pilgrims enter as individuals since they believe that they have the chance to directly receive the saint’s blessings. All in all, inside the *mazars*, formal

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<sup>175</sup> Interview with author, Bawa Muhaiyaddeen *Mazar*, Coatesville, Pennsylvania. April 21, 2014.

<sup>176</sup> Rehman completed her PhD in the Department of History, Religions, Institute for Regional and Crosscultural Studies at the University of Copenhagen. Her thesis was entitled *Sufi Shrines and Identity Construction in Pakistan: The Mazars of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai and Syed Pir Waris Shah* (2008). She is a Research Fellow at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies in Copenhagen, Denmark. Her work explores identities of pilgrims and devotees as they

social or religious backgrounds become irrelevant as mediating structures” (75). Thus for the pilgrims, who are mainly from South Asian Islamic cultural backgrounds, *mazars* are known culturally and ritually to be fluid and dynamic sacred spaces, and so these understandings influence individual practices and ritual observances enacted by them at the *mazar*, a reality that the Fellowship members are now negotiating.

When I spoke to a young Pakistani female who residing in Philadelphia near the Fellowship community, because of her teaching post at Lehigh University, I asked her about her experience at the *mazar*. She explained that her initial visit to the *mazar* felt odd due to the quiet and order at the *mazar*. For her *mazars* that she has experienced across the Muslim world, such as in South Asia or the Middle East, were loud and involved a lot of pushing (i.e., crowds) and were not as quiet and calm as she found Bawa’s *mazar*. This difference was something she had to adjust too. Such comparisons of the protocol of *mazars* in South Asian context (where most of the pilgrims are from) and Bawa’s *mazar* in Coatesville might actually signal to a significant point of departure in American *mazars*. The silence and order and lack of ritual accouterments (i.e., incense etc) capture some of the characteristics of Bawa’s *mazar*, which are different from *mazars* across the Muslim world. This will be noteworthy to compare with other Sufi shrines in North America to determine if this indeed is a trend.<sup>177</sup>

During the same weekend on Sunday after the wisdom meeting in the welcome center, I was sitting outside the *mazar* with five members of the Fellowship, listening to stories of Bawa and their travels with him to Sri Lanka. Sitting at the table next to us was an older Pakistani man and we had asked him to join us but he explained that his English was “no

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are negotiated at the shrines of two eighteenth<sup>th</sup> century Sufi saints in Pakistan. She has published on this topic and teaches on contemporary Islam and Sufism.

<sup>177</sup> This is further confirmed in Chapter 6 where the parallel institution of the *mazar* within Bawa’s communities, that is of Mankumban in Kayts Island is situated.

good” and that he rather not. A few minutes later some younger gentlemen who were with this elderly man returned and the same older gentleman excused us politely and asked if we could explain to the young gentlemen about Bawa-ji, the honorific many South Asian pilgrims use when referring to Bawa. And so both groups formed a large circle and the disciples of Bawa took the opportunity to share teachings and experiences of Bawa with the pilgrims who were visiting on this Sunday in April.

During this group conversation in a large circle outside the *mazar*, I asked this group of Pakistani-Americans how they heard about the *mazar*. One of the gentleman explained that he had seen it on the Internet and could not believe that there was a *mazar* in America, so they drove down from Brooklyn just to see if it was true. He explained that in Pakistan *mazars* are everywhere, and so when he walked into Bawa’s *mazar* he nostalgically conveyed “I felt I was back home.” The young man sitting beside him added that with *mazars* “back home” only our great ancestors knew the saint “but today to be sitting here in America with disciples who sat with Bawa-ji is a great blessing for us.” They all stood up and the males embraced each other with *salaams* and they offered the females *salaams* verbally and went on their way to explore the grounds further. This group spent the day on the property, walking around the open space, eating food from the welcome center and chatting amongst themselves.

In this moment of dialogue, it became evident to me that for pilgrims who come to the *mazar*, not only was accessing the blessings at the *mazar* through Bawa’s tomb a critical part of their experience but encountering Bawa’s direct disciples was also another means of accessing the blessing of a saint. This tendency was also experienced in Pemberton’s study of shrines in India wherein she noted the custom of *subhat* (company) or the practice of a disciple wanting to keep “company” with his master, was also translated in the need to keep



“company” with “fellow disciples” of the master (Pemberton 2004, 7). This tradition which often results in acts of reverence or respect imparted upon direct disciples of Bawa is a reality that is not easily understood by the American disciples, who are overwhelmed by such respect and attention. These moments of interface are a unique component of Bawa’s *mazar*. Immigrant pilgrims seeking the grace of a Sufi saint interchange with his direct diverse disciples, not only because they share the space, but also for some visitors, the opportunity to meet and greet a direct disciple of Bawa-ji, is a way in which Bawa’s grace may be accessed. Such moments of meetings between pilgrims (visitors) and disciples of Bawa highlights a significant development in Sufism in North America. The Fellowship, a uniquely North American phenomenon, is now a space in which immigrant Muslims freely utilize. Studies on the pilgrimage practices to Catholic shrines in North America suggest that, for those from immigrant backgrounds, the shrine becomes a space in which memories of religious practices in their natal homelands can be re-created according to their own cosmology and memory, both in their understanding of the saint’s body (in this case Bawa) but also in terms of the general meaning of a shrine (Tweed 1997; Pena 2011). It is the American experience of immigration that adds a new layer to this unique community and will continue to have various transformative impacts for a community that has a smaller membership, but larger attraction of visitors.

The arrival of the new pilgrims and visitors was not a development that the caretakers of the *mazar* were expecting when it was first constructed. Kabir, for instance, is part of a team of caretakers, who lives near the *mazar* and volunteers his time to take care of the entire Fellowship farm property. He explained his initial surprise when pilgrims started arriving at the *mazar*:

Kabir: We never knew what it was like to, of course, to maintain and take care of a *mazar*. We didn't know what was involved in it other than Ajwad and in Dr. Markar and Dr. G were telling us certain things and parameters and things to do. So we followed that but we had no, we didn't realize until people started coming because there was hardly anybody out here in the beginning. It was very, very quiet. And then very slowly people started to show up, you know [...]. And come and we learned, you know, the duty now. There's a new duty we have.

S: Which is what?

Kabir: Which is to protect it, to assure that people can come, comfortably, and have something to eat, a cup of tea, a place to get out of the cold. We needed to build bathrooms and ablution rooms. Cause it was very simple in the beginning you know. It was just a little well over there and that was it. There was no buildings or anything [...]. I mean it's been twenty-eight years so we're still growing slowly.<sup>178</sup>

As Kabir indicates, when the *mazar* of Bawa was first built, it was a private Fellowship space that served as a community cemetery and a small agricultural project. With the arrival of new visitors and pilgrims to Bawa's tomb, a new responsibility has emerged for members of the Fellowship, especially those who reside near the farm. For Kabir this responsibility or "duty" is now service to those who visit, through the upkeep of the property, maintenance of facilities and providing of food and shelter to those who travel from afar to visit Bawa. The arrival of

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<sup>178</sup> Interview with author, Bawa Muhaiyaddeen *Mazar*, Coatesville, Pennsylvania. April 21, 2014.

the pilgrims from across North America has transformed the role of Fellowship members. The early disciples of Bawa, mainly the American disciples who moved to be near the *mazar*, are now Bawa's shrine caretakers. However, this new responsibility of sharing the *mazar* comes with negotiations.

### **Negotiating the Sacred at the *Mazar* of Bawa**

During my visit to Philadelphia during the *Qutb Mawlid* in February 2014 I met a gentleman from New York, who was passing out a New York based Urdu newspaper. I was sitting with another member from New York, who was visiting for the weekend for the celebrations. He came up to us on his way out and opened the newspaper and handed it to us. This Pakistani man from New York, who is an owner of a hotel, showed me a full page advertisement posted of a photograph of Bawa, along with a photograph of the *mazar* in honour of Bawa's death anniversary. When I asked him how he knew about Bawa, he said that he had met him as a child and has been devoted to him ever since. He explained simply "Bawa is my *shaykh*." He apologized but said he had to leave as he was driving back to New York, but invited both of us to visit the meetings that his group held on Thursday evenings that consisted of *dhikr* and meetings that they have been hosting for five years. After he rushed out, I turned to the New York Fellowship member whom I was sitting with and who leads meetings for Bawa Muhaiyaddeen in New York, and I asked him if he attended any of this gentleman's events. He replied this was the first time that he heard that another group was meeting for Bawa in New York.

After this brief meeting, I had the opportunity to chat with a member of the Fellowship who was hosting me for the weekend. When I asked her why the previous year the Gujarati

*urs* was not held, she mentioned that sometimes it was difficult because the visitors were not coming to visit Bawa, as they had known him as a living teacher, but rather the space itself. Fellowship members want visitors to be interested in Bawa, not rituals or the act of receiving blessings and graces. However, another reason why the Gujarati festival did not happen the year that I was conducting fieldwork, according to some other members, was because of the Boston Bombings during the Boston Marathon in April 2013.<sup>179</sup> Leaders at the Fellowship were worried that such large celebrations that attract many immigrant Muslims to a small town in Pennsylvania might cause alarm amongst the neighbours. When I showed my host the advertisement of Bawa in the Urdu newspaper she was surprised. She did not realize that there was an advertisement of Bawa and the *mazar* in the newspaper. She got a copy for herself and informed me that she would share it with the other members. What these series of conversations that I was part of indicate is that many of those who gather at the Fellowship have established their own groups outside the Fellowship. They do not necessarily affiliate with the Fellowship in terms of institutional ties, but this however does not mean that these groups are not “connected” to Bawa, as some members of the Fellowship feel. They have created their own affiliations with Bawa and his *mazar*.

The *mazar* is also a site at which large groups of pilgrims gather to celebrate varying *urs* festivals. Gujarati Muslims from the Eastern Seaboard have been gathering annually for their own *urs* celebrations since the early 2000s. Fakir Muhammad and his family began visiting the *mazar* in 1998 and each subsequent year his networks expanded and the group that visited

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<sup>179</sup> On April 13, 2013 two bombs exploded during the Boston Marathon killing three people and injuring hundreds. The attacks were linked to Chechen brothers Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev. The search for these two resulted in an intense manhunt that unfolded over several days and attracted the attention of media networks in United States, most of which immediately linked them to foreign terrorist organizations. In the aftermath, it was found that there were no such links and the two men orchestrated the attacks on their own. At present Dzhokhar Tsarnaev is appealing his death sentence.

with him grew. As a result Fakir Muhammad organized a yearly gathering of Gujarati Muslims at the *mazar* in collaboration with members of the Fellowship. The year that was I completing my fieldwork, the festival was cancelled, for reasons mentioned above.

Further research needs to be completed particularly on the visitors who are coming to the *mazar*. From my initial encounters with these diverse pilgrims, it appears that for some they maintain a personal relationship with Bawa, while for others, such as the Pakistani-Americans that I spoke to from Brooklyn, New York, did not. Of the former, though they may not be institutionally affiliated with the Fellowship, they certainly have an affinity with Bawa. For example, during the *Rasul mawlid* in the dead of a cold and snowy winter in early January 2014, I travelled with two members, Roshan and Judiya from the Toronto Fellowship to Philadelphia. During our visit to Philadelphia we visited the *mazar*. In the welcome center, Roshan began to speak with a visiting family. The family consisted of two males one in a *kufi* (brimless cup), beard and traditional *shalweer kamaz* (long shirt-pant outfit) and the other was clean-shaven and in jeans. There were also some young children (two boys and two girls) and their mother, who was wearing a black *niqab* (full gown with face-covering) who I noticed filling water into jugs from the pump and using the wheel barrel to move it in the car. They eventually came inside and took some food, but they ate separately and did not speak to us.

I soon found out that they had driven from New Jersey, which is two hours away from the *mazar*. Judiya asked if this visitor had a *shaykh* in New Jersey, and he pointed to the *mazar* and said, “my *shaykh* is buried there.” He had a dream about a *mazar* and so inquired from others and even researched on the Internet trying to place where the *mazar* he had dreamt of was. He discovered that it was in Pennsylvania and so he came to visit. That is how he learned about Bawa, which began his connection with his *shaykh*, Bawa. Roshan told him that we

were here for the *mawlid* and explained what was happening at the *masjid*, and told them that they should come. The two men spoke to each other in Urdu, and then had said that they would try to. When we returned to the Fellowship later that afternoon, we found the pilgrims and his family there. These encounters suggest that not all the pilgrims who are visiting are doing so without any “personal” connection to Bawa. For some, after their initial visit to the *mazar*, they continue to visit just the *mazar* regularly to maintain the practice of *ziyara* and to access *baraka* at the tomb of whom they understand is a Sufi saint.

In addition to these individual visits, members of the Fellowship branches across North America and globally also play a critical role in how they network with local Sufi communities. These local connections lead to sharing of Bawa, but also of his spaces such as the *mazar*. For instance, Mississauga, in the Greater Toronto Region, contains the Canadian branch of the Azeemia Spiritual and Healing Center Canada, whose current leader is Khwaja Shamsuddin Azeemi.<sup>180</sup> The center organizes an annual event known as Adam’s Day or “Unity in Diversity” which honours the origins of humanity in the patriarch of Adam. These events initiated by Khawja Shamsuddic Azeemi are held in America, United Kingdom and Canada. This event also celebrates the anniversary of the order’s patron Qalandar Baba Auliya, who founded the *silsila-e-azeemia* in Karachi, Pakistan. The community has international centers across Europe, the United Kingdom, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, the

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<sup>180</sup> Khawaja Shamsuddin Azeemi is an editor of magazines known as the *Roohani Digest*, both in Karachi and Internationally. He is a student of Qalander Baba Auliya (Hasan Ukhra Syed Mohammad Azeem Barkhiya) who is connected to the tradition of Hazrat Abu Ayub Ansari, whose lineage within the community is traced to the Prophet Muhammad. It is his community that is known as the Azeemia Sufi Order and is based in Karachi, Pakistan. Qalander Baba Auliya was born in 1898 in Khorja, Buland Sheher in India. Khawaja Shamsuddic Azeemi was born in October 1927 Saharanpur, India. It is his books (a total of forty-two thus far) that have gained him acclaim as a spiritual leader. His communities, known as Muraqba Halls, have grown internationally spanning from Europe, America, Russia and Canada. For more on this community please see: [http://azeemiasilsila.org/khwaja\\_shamsuddin.php](http://azeemiasilsila.org/khwaja_shamsuddin.php) (Accessed March 1, 2015).

United States and Canada. It is orientated in Islam and Sufism but also utilizes colour therapy, meditation (*muraqba* or mental concentration) and parapsychology while stressing scientific thought. Their main website streams events live and provides access to audio and video archives, while *duas* can also be requested online. This community extends invitation to events, such as Adam's Day, to other spiritual communities, including known Sufi groups in the region. It is through such events that they met members of the Toronto Branch of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship.

Informal meetings between the Fellowship members in Toronto and the Azeemia Sufi Order resulted in the organization of a group visit (sixty to seventy guests) to the *mazar* of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen. The members of the Toronto Branch and the *mazar* caretakers facilitated in the organization of this trip at the formal request of the Azeemia Sufi Foundation in Canada. About twenty members came from Toronto, while the majority of the guests travelled from the tri-state area, the east coast of the States and even from further south in America.<sup>181</sup> An email was sent out to members of the Fellowship requesting that anyone who was available to help host the visitors to the *mazar* to do so. The program for the visit consisted of arrival at 10:30 AM, the changing of the *chaddor* (clothe) of Bawa's grave, the recitation of *dhikr*, lunch and completion of the visit with *zuhr* (noon) prayers in the prayer pavilion across from the *mazar*.

Such above examples of Sufi-Muslim groups visiting from across the United States and Canada signals that the *mazar* has been solidified as a central site of pilgrimage for Muslim and Sufi communities in North America. These acts of pilgrimages also suggest that the *mazar* is a place for *khalwah* (spiritual retreat). This act of retreating or withdrawing from the

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<sup>181</sup> The details of this visit were sent out on the Fellowship listserv on October 24, 2014.

physical world, by isolating oneself at a sacred space, by limiting sleep and food, and reciting special prayers for spiritual developments has been an important practice in Sufism prescribed by Sufi teachers for their students' spiritual developments. In many ways, the aim of visiting the tomb of Bawa, either as a member of the Fellowship, as a member of another Sufi community or as an individual seeker, is a shared experience. Retreating to or making a pilgrimage to a *mazar* results in internal spiritual re-orientation. Though the story behind the journey and the resulting movements, as suggested by Ho (2006) may differ, the focus remains the tomb. The legacy of the dead and their connection to a source (i.e., God) transcends limitations of the materiality of the sacred space and connects all those who arrive at the *mazar*.

The *mazar* attracts pilgrims, and most of those who visit are not formal members of the Fellowship or may not even be interested in Bawa's teachings. But this does not necessarily entail that they are not devoted to Bawa, as was evident with some of the visitors I met. The members of the Fellowship, most of whom are disciples of Bawa, and some are converts to Islam, are now the shrine keepers of a *mazar*. They have accepted the responsibility of hosting the pilgrims, maintaining the property and sharing the teachings and stories of Bawa to those who are interested. All the while the *mazar* remains a meaningful space for Fellowship members. It is a site wherein ritual activity unfolds but also a community is maintained through farming. As Finnegan (2011) expressed and as I have further evidenced in this chapter, this space is indeed a public Sufi space. It serves many, from those in the Fellowship to the broader Muslim and Sufi communities in North America and beyond. With my initial encounters with pilgrims at the *mazar*, it is difficult to fully conclude about these broader trends, especially since I was not able to experience all the activities at the *mazar* as instituted



by the pilgrims. Further research that captures the stories of the pilgrims at the *mazar* is needed to account for this particular facet in the larger composition of the Fellowship institutions in America. Yet it is without a doubt that the *mazar* of Bawa in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, has indeed transformed into a center of pilgrimage in the North American landscape.

#### *Future Developments of the Fellowship Farm*

I found out during my fieldwork that the land purposed for the cemetery, that now includes the *mazar* and farm, was actually intended to be the place that the *masjid* for the Fellowship was to be initially built. Kabir informed me that this original project by Bawa is still under way:

Kabir: We're in front of the local government now. We're about sixt-five percent done and [...] it's an institutional zoning. So it's an institutional project, which allows us to do both residential and institutional. So we have a mosque planned and we're actually sitting in the mosque right now. Yeah it would go right here [signaling to the space we are sitting in during the interview]. So there's a mosque planned and there's a Fellowship house. There's a school, which could be a retirement facility, it could be anything in the future. And then that garage, we're going to build a new garage down over the hill and that's going to become a library. Archival work and people can go and research. It will be like a small campus. You know we're trying to keep it simple.

S: What was the impetus, like what was the idea behind it? Who wanted to have it or was that something Bawa always wanted to have, a mosque?

Kabir: Oh no, he [Bawa] said we'd have to have a mosque here. When we had the cemetery cause that's why we bought the land, [it] was for a cemetery when one of our members died and we realized there wasn't, we needed a good way to bury people. So to do it properly [...] that's why we were looking for land. That's why the land hunt came up was just specifically for the cemetery. But then he said we could farm it if we wanted to, if there was enough land we could farm it. And then he said there will [*sic*] have to be a mosque there. And we have tapes of him saying all of this. We needed to keep all of that together to establish that he did want it done. So, you know, with the mosque comes a kitchen, a place for people to study, a little school and everything [...]. So he was aware of what we were doing. And we actually, we thought there was going to be a mosque built out here before the one in Philly [...]. You probably heard that story.

S: Yeah, I did. They were initially planning it but I guess the distance was a problem, to drive out here?

Kabir: Yeah. Well this is the way Bawa goes about things. We really thought it was going to be here. We cleared all of the land and then I remember he brought me in and he said, "so you know we have a little design and everything but thambi [younger brother] can I ask you a question?" And he goes, "who is going to pray there?" And I said "well there's some people who we have people out there." And he goes "not too many people though right?" And I said "no, not too many people." And he said "now tell me if we build that, the only beings that I can see that might pray there all the time would be the birds and the

squirrels.” He said “let’s build it in here [points to the heart].” And it just went like that. Everything changed. But he was so sweet the way he did it.<sup>182</sup>

The farm property has more additions that await its future. Once zoning plans are approved, the intention is to build a complex around the tomb of Bawa, which would include a *masjid*, school, library and residential places for disciples. Historically, such complexes have been the reality of Sufi communities and a fundamental component of the development and proliferation of Islam across different regions and cultures.<sup>183</sup> Yet this development plan also points to further contestations amongst the members of the Fellowship and what they understand the purpose of the *mazar* and Bawa to be.

In Finnegan’s research on the farm community, she noted the disagreements over the future plans for the Fellowship farm: “there has been debate and tension over the future plans, as some believe that the proposed mosque and related buildings go against the purpose and meaning of the property and Bawa’s teachings” (2011, 146). Kabir indicated in his comments to me above, all the plans for the *mazar* property are to be found in recorded tapes of Bawa.<sup>184</sup> For some members of the Fellowship with more universal understanding of Islam, the building of a *masjid* by the Fellowship is not a necessity, and in fact signals further potential ruptures that may parallel the schism that unfolded in the process of building of the *masjid* in Philadelphia. For other members who practice *salat*, they do so now either in the prayer pavilion or in the *mazar*. Fellowship visitors, especially women, also complete *salat* outside in

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<sup>182</sup> Interview with author, Bawa Muhaiyaddeen *Mazar*, Coatesville, Pennsylvania. April 21, 2014.

<sup>183</sup> See Chapter 1 subsection on *Sufi Centers of Activities* and Shrine Cultures for more detail on this and Chapter 8, subsection on women and Sufi shrines for more on these spaces.

<sup>184</sup> I was not able to access these discourses by Bawa, so I am not able to confirm Bawa’s instructions to his communities.

open spaces if the weather permits and nooks inside the welcome center beside food tables. For visiting Muslim pilgrims and some members of the Fellowship who keep daily Islamic prayers, the *masjid* will be a valuable space for the completion of prayers. However for members of the Fellowship who do not necessarily affiliate with Islam outwardly, this new building may present further challenges for a Fellowship that is becoming ever more “Islamic” not only with its new visitors, but with the potential addition of new “Islamic” buildings. These developments will be critical to follow to understand the Fellowship of Bawa and its ever-transforming spaces, especially without a living *shaykh* to authorize its institutionalization. So the question remains, what will the *mazar* and its surrounding property look like in the future? Who will be visiting its threshold to invoke the blessings from the tomb of Bawa? And who will be the future shrine-keepers?

For now, it is the *mazar* that is attracting the pilgrims and it appears that this trend will not be changing. In fact it is safe to predict, based on the patterns of growth in the last decades alone, that it will continue to grow as more and more visitors flock to its threshold and it continues to receive international acclaim.<sup>185</sup> My observations of and interactions with pilgrims of various ethnic, cultural, linguistic and gender identities with differing affinities to Islam (i.e., Sufi, Sunni, Shi‘a) that travel from varying distances across the United States and even internationally (i.e., Canada and England) highlight a noteworthy element of the purpose of a *mazar*. The new travellers, who are usually Muslim immigrants, bring their own

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<sup>185</sup> The famous Bollywood Oscar-winning singer and song writer, A. R. Rahman, who is a Hindu convert to Islam because of his mother’s connection to Sufi healers in South Asia, visited the *mazar* of Bawa while on a musical tour in New York, in the United States. A R. Rahman is an Indian composer, singer-songwriter, music producer and musician. He has won two Academy Awards, two Grammy Awards, a BAFTA Award, a Golden Globe and many more awards for his music and film scores. Carnatic, Hindustani and Qawwali music heavily influence Rahman’s music. His visit to the *mazar* was posted on a Bawa Muhiyaddeen Facebook group, which has since been inaccessible.

narratives and understandings of the *mazar* from their homeland. They add new layers to the *mazar* of Bawa in Coatesville whose shrine-keepers, the members of the Fellowship, some of whom are American converts to Islam and Sufism and others are universally inclined Sufis, are learning to share their space of Bawa and serve Bawa by serving his new visitors.

These multiple narratives call attention to the intricacies and pieties of Sufism, Islam and spirituality as it is developing in North America. It would appear that for a saint and holy figure, such as Bawa, whose own institutions and teachings from Sri Lanka to North America attracted religiously, ethnically and culturally diverse followers, that the diversity of pilgrims to his *mazar* would be no different. As these negotiations and accommodations take place at the *mazar* of Bawa in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, what is unmistakable is that the practice of *ziyara* is now a notable component of Sufi piety in the landscape of Islam in North America. Ho wrote in his study “with burial, the dead bring a place to life, as it were” (2006, 61), this is indeed evident at the grave of Bawa- living Sufism in North America. A living Sufism that is not solely a “hybrid” or North American phenomenon with converts and universalists, but one that is ever dynamic because of the growing presence of immigrant pilgrims from South Asia to the Middle East and beyond. It is their gathering and sharing at the tomb of Bawa that is indicative of the vibrant nature of Sufism in North America. Though this begs the question; is this reality of pluralism and diversity within Sufism and its shared spaces unique to North America, or is it an inherent reality of the traditions of Sufism itself? To seek answers to this question one must return to the origins of this transnational community, the topic of our next section.

## Conclusions

This chapter situated the *mazar* of Bawa in Coatesville, Pennsylvania. Though I have devoted a separate chapter to the *mazar*, I do not see the *mazar* as separate from the Fellowship in Philadelphia, but actually part of the larger spaces that form the Fellowship in North America. In my above discussion, I provided two predominant but interwoven narratives. The first was that of the members of the Fellowship who utilized this space for a range of activities. These are inclusive of community commemorations (i.e., Bawa's death anniversary and meetings etc.), burial of members in the cemetery and farming projects, which are all completed by volunteer members who reside near the larger complex that includes the *mazar*.

For many of the Fellowship members, the *mazar* in Coatesville is connected to the shrine to Maryam on Velanai Island known as Mankumban, which is developed further in the next section. For the members of the Fellowship, the *mazar* is a central communal space of gathering, one that was solidified with Bawa's burial on this property and the subsequent building of a burial shrine for him by the members of the Fellowship. Members of the Fellowship, who reside in North America and across the globe (i.e., England, Saudi Arabia), visit the *mazar* to maintain connections with Bawa, but also understand the *mazar* as part of a larger network of spaces that includes his spaces in Sri Lanka, the topic of the next section, and sites such as the Well of Zamzam in Mecca. Importantly, the members of the Fellowship, especially those who live in immediate proximity to the *mazar*, are also custodians of the *mazar* and hosts to visiting pilgrims.

In this chapter, I pointed out further that in the last two decades, a new cohort of visitors have started arriving to the *mazar* of Bawa. Immigrant Muslims from across the United States and Canada, who are from predominantly Muslim majority nations, have started arriving at

Bawa's *mazar*. These visitors have found a site that reminds them of their natal lands. The thought of a burial tomb for a Muslim saint is almost too good to be true, and so, as many of the visitors informed me, they come to the *mazar* to see if it is actually real. These pilgrims, who share word of the *mazar* amongst their families and friends, along with sharing it online on the Internet and other media forums, such as local community newspapers or posting of photographs on social media (i.e., Facebook). They have helped spread the message that there is indeed a Sufi saint buried in Pennsylvania and his grace is ever present. Thus Bawa not only established Headquarters in Philadelphia, where regular communal activities take place and Islamic prayers are kept. But his resting place in America has solidified him as a Sufi saint and *shaykh* and so the Tamil Sufi from Sri Lanka has become the Pennsylvania Sufi of America.

In Chapter 1 in this section, I provided the context in which the Fellowship developed. The unique development of Sufism in North America was influenced by the experience of Persian poetry by Orientalists who presented Sufism as other than Islam. The arrival of Sufi teachers from the east, such as the first being Hazrat Inayat Khan (d. 1927), led to the institutionalization of the master-student relationship in North America. Sufi teachers and their followers proliferated in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. Externally the development of Sufism is influenced by factors that resist Islam due to the growth of Islamophobia. Internally within Islam, however, are further currents that have given rise to anti-Sufi sentiments, which challenge Sufism and those who adhere to it. This is the current climate of Sufism in North America, but also of the Fellowship in North America. The Fellowship is a community that has been variously identified as a Sufi, Muslim, South Asian and non-Muslim Sufi community. Thus the titles Sufi and Muslim are labels that present

varying challenges in the twenty-first century, but the labeling of the Fellowship within these categories also limits the complex diversity inherent within the Fellowship.

Chapter 2 situated the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and its numerous sub-spaces, such as Bawa's room, the meeting hall, bookstore and publication house, a kitchen and a *masjid* (mosque). Often the *masjid* of the Fellowship draws the most attention, both within the community and in the scholarship of the Fellowship. But my research indicates that the *masjid* is one facet of the larger complex that is the Fellowship in which various ritual activities take place. These include the commemoration of birthdays (*mawlid*s) of the Prophet Muhammad or Abdul Qadir Jilani and the death anniversary (*urs*) of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen.

In Chapter 3 I presented Bawa's *mazar*, the most notable site within this movement in North America. For members of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, I situated the various spaces that form the *mazar* complex, this includes a welcome center and garden projects. The Fellowship members utilize this space for ritual purposes, such as to perform daily *dhikr*, or the prayer of remembrance. In this chapter I also captured the narratives of non-Fellowship pilgrims who complete pilgrimages to the *mazar* from across North America. I illustrated the diverse approaches to the uses of the *mazar*, specifically for members of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship and, in recent development, for non-Fellowship members who seek blessings (*baraka*) from a Sufi teacher. The arrival of new Muslim pilgrims to the *mazar* of Bawa has transformed the Tamil Sufi teacher from Sri Lanka to the Pennsylvania Sufi of America.

With Bawa's formative spaces in the North American landscape clearly laid out, the question remains if these currents of pieties and practices noted in Bawa's North American



communities are indeed unique to North America or a consequence of Bawa's ministry specifically? In order to explore this, it is necessary to visit the root of this transnational organization. Understanding the Sri Lankan context of this community helps to understand the broader trajectory of this movement not merely as a North American or South Asian phenomenon, but to apprehend its transnational presence while illuminating its localized varieties. This contextualization is valuable as it provides an example of contemporary global Sufism. Exploring the Sri Lankan sites of Bawa provides a means to determine whether the practices noted in Philadelphia are replicated in Sri Lanka, if they are not what rituals are practiced and how are they different? Do the roles of gender follow a similar pattern in Sri Lanka? And how are Bawa's ministries maintained and by whom?

## Section II

### The Roots of a Transnational Community

On July 12, 2013 when I was spending my day at the *ashram* in Jaffna a Hindu father and daughter came to venerate Bawa. The man's daughter was about to get married. So they visited the *ashram* in order to receive blessings for this auspicious day. The father lit incense sticks and touched his head to the foot of the bed. He went to the picture hanging behind the bed of Bawa and touched that with his hands and kissed it. I was sitting by the wall and reading. Noticing me, the curious and outgoing daughter, the sibling of the girl who was to be married, joined me by the wall and started a conversation. She explained that her sister's engagement was Saturday and so she had taken the day off from school, where she teaches, to prepare for the event. When the opportunity arose, I asked her how she knew about Bawa. She said that her uncle told her father about Bawa when her mother was in a coma in the hospital. Once her father came to see Bawa for help, her mother got well and since then her father always visited the *ashram* to give homage to Bawa. She asked what I was doing at the *ashram*. I explained that I was studying Sufism and so I came to learn about it at Bawa's *ashram*. Looking confused she asked, "What is Sufism?" As I tried to figure out how to reply to her question, she added quickly that she did not know what Sufism was. Curious now that she did not know about Sufism, I asked further why she came to the *ashram*, she explained that she believed in Bawa, who was almost like god to her, a *swami* and that is why she was here.

In the previous section I situated the community of Bawa in North America through two central spaces, one in Philadelphia and the other in Coatesville. Collectively these spaces serve as the legacy of the ministries of Bawa, a ministry that in life and now in Bawa's death has continued to attract varying religious devotees. In exploring these sites, I proposed that amongst the immediate disciples of Bawa and within early scholarship on this community, many have grappled with the diversity of Bawa's community and have assumed this diversity to be a reality of North American Sufism, but is it? To understand the diversity of Bawa's ministries in North America, in this section I engage with Bawa's community in Sri Lanka.

Chapter 4 contextualizes the presence of Islam and Sufism in Sri Lanka historically, especially by focusing on shared sacred spaces across the island. In Chapter 4 I also draw attention to the heightened and polarizing tendencies within Muslim communities, between those (1) inclined towards pieties of Sufism and (2) those orientated towards reformist and revivalist movements. In the midst of Muslim identity politics on a national level, political figures and nationalists aim to write a new future for Sri Lanka with a united national front and ethnic identity, one that often privileges the ethnic and religious block of Sinhala Buddhist majority on the island. Internal Muslim dynamics may be paralleled to the external factors highlighted in Chapter 1, where the development of Sufism and the Fellowship in North America was explained. (1) Anti-Sufi sentiments and (2) Islamophobia, even as they locally manifest, frame both the American and Sri Lankan communities of Bawa. In Sri Lanka, however, ethno-political strife led to civil war from 1983-2009, making the identity politics of the region distinctive from its North American counterpart.

This context on Sri Lanka provides the much-needed context to grasp the distinct position of Islam and Muslims in this larger landscape, one that implicates Bawa's communities. The

second half of the chapter situates the current climate of Islam in Sri Lanka, particularly as it relates to contemporary examples of discrimination against the Muslim community. I highlight these complexities of religious, ethnic and national identities because despite these challenges of violent identity politics in Sri Lanka, one still finds that Bawa's first institution remain religiously diverse, even more so than the Fellowship in North America.

The next two chapters in this section capture how this diversity manifests in Bawa's sacred spaces in Sri Lanka. Chapter 5 maps Bawa's Sri Lankan institution, which is known as the Serendib Sufi Study Circle (SSSC). Bawa's earliest and first institution was his residence (*ashram*) in Jaffna, which is the principal site for daily ritual activity, similar to the purpose of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship Headquarters in Philadelphia. In Chapter 5 I focus specifically on rituals and acts of personal piety that unfold at the *ashram* of Bawa to further capture how Tamil Hindu presence forms a significant and distinctive feature of Bawa's Sri Lankan communities in the north.

In Chapter 6 I situate Mankumban, a *masjid-mazar* complex, by highlighting ritual activities that unfold in this unique space. I also capture some of the many interpretations of its use and its significance for both local devotees and for Fellowship pilgrims from North America. In locating both the *ashram* (Chapter 5) and the *masjid-mazar* complex (Chapter 6) I conclude that though these spaces host a vibrant Hindu and Muslim demographic, there are some similar practices that can be traced from Sri Lanka to North America. In tracing the phenomenon of Bawa's community from Pennsylvania (Section I) to Jaffna (Section II), this section exemplifies that the diversity noted in Bawa's North American communities is even more prevalent in Jaffna.



Figure 4.1: Map of Sri Lanka, with significant spaces discussed in this chapter in relation to Sufism and Bawa's communities. Spaces discussed in this chapter are indicated with a star. Map adapted by author, original source: <https://www.google.ca/maps/@7.9264958,80.4748964,8z> (Accessed June 10, 2015).

## **Chapter 4**

### **Tracing the Roots of the Fellowship**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter I position Sufism in Sri Lanka through its history of shared spaces amongst different religious communities, while also addressing the ethno-linguistic strife that has riddled the island, which recently culminated in a nearly thirty-year civil war. The development of Sufism, especially through oral narratives and sacred spaces, and the subsequent violence experienced across the island in the name of national identity has created many divisions. In this politicized context emerges Bawa's first ministry in Sri Lanka. The development of Bawa and his message of unity and peace in times of discord in this region are worthy of mention, because in a climate of religious persecution and violence materializes a religiously diverse community predicated on devotion to Bawa. I argue that this community, even more so than its counterpart in North America, remains diverse despite this fragile milieu.

The scholarship on the politics, identities, nationalisms and civil strife in Sri Lanka is one that has been studied and expounded by many vibrant scholars (Amarasingam 2013, 2015; de Silva 1998, 2005; Spencer 2002, 2011; Thiranagama 2011) and this brief introduction in no way attempts to capture the depth of its history or the nuances of its contemporary politics. Moreover, this chapter does not aim to provide a comprehensive historical analysis of the development of Sufism or its contemporary manifestations in Sri Lanka, though it aims to contribute to this area of study. Scholars have addressed Sri Lankan Sufism through article length studies, but a monograph study of Sufism in historical or contemporary Sri Lanka has yet to be written, as far as I am aware. Considering the current climate of Muslim politics on the island, such a project would be worthwhile. Despite what this chapter does not do, this chapter does call attention to

the rise of militancy and violence among Tamil militants as it resulted in the expulsion of the Muslims from Jaffna. It was in Jaffna that Bawa first established his communities. It was during the events that led to the Ealeam Wars (1983-2009) that North American disciples of Bawa visited Sri Lanka and it is here, in the aftermath of war, that Bawa's diverse Sri Lankan disciples and his spaces thrive.

### **Sufism in Sri Lanka**

The pluralism of Islam is nowhere more evident than in the continent of South Asia. From its early development, Islam in South Asia has proliferated and expanded premised on the embrace (however contested) of diversity. Islam's marriage with the eclectic religious, cultural, political and linguistic milieus of South Asia and its subsequent developments have created the present climate of heterogeneous religiosities and spiritualities in this vast region (Eaton 2003; Metcalf 2009; Gottschalk 2000). These expansions of Islam in South Asia have led to some of the most assorted studies in the growth of Sufism and its interface with non-Muslim practitioners. This is notable especially in communities that formed in relation to living and dead Muslim holy figures, or Sufi saints, who ministered according to the diversity that was reflected in their immediate environments (Currie 1989; Ernst and Lawrence 2002; Rozeahnal 2007; Bellamy 2011; Bigelow 2010). The resultant practices and pieties due to the encounters between Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist and Christian traditions have been variously articulated (Sikand 2007).

Scholarship has presented these as processes of "localization" or "vernacularization" of Islam into regional or "cult" communities (Gilmartin and Lawrence 2000; Mohammad 2013;

Flueckiger 2006). Asfar Mohammad<sup>186</sup> in his study of Islam in South Asia has noted the “pluralistic devotional culture” as a feature of Islam as it is lived, especially as it centered on a holy figure (Mohammad 2013, 19). Mohammad writes “[t]hese locally produced forms of Islam emphasize the embeddedness of local Islam in a pluralistic community of both Muslim and non-Muslim populations, as well as how Islam in particular place is linked to processes at work in the larger Islamic world” (Mohammad 2013, 7). The nature of these discussions of Islam and Sufism as they unfold regionally is significant for the current study, as it engages with embodied Sufism as inherently diverse in South Asia. This framework provides a valuable analytical orientation to rethinking Sufism in North America, wherein diversity and plurality of Sufism is seen as an inconsistency.

### *Muslims in Sri Lanka*<sup>187</sup>

In studies of Islam in South Asia, Sri Lanka is rarely imagined in the variegated landscape as playing a role in the formation of Islamic heritages and cultures of South Asia. Sri Lanka was known as Ceylon.<sup>188</sup> It was an important node in the trade networks that formed across the Indian Ocean. Sri Lankan Muslims, who self-identify as Moors due to the label that their Portuguese

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<sup>187</sup> I have presented versions of this section of my chapter at two separate workshops. The initial draft of this section was completed for the *Modern South Asia Conference* at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, which I participated in April 5-6, 2014. The second draft of this section was part of *The Many Histories of the Present: Past and Possibilities in the Muslim World*, at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina from April 17-19, 2015. I am thankful to all the participants from the workshops that provided valuable feedback and guidance with both versions of this chapter.

<sup>188</sup> There are different interpretations for these names attributed to this island. According to Abeydeera (1992) Serendib or Sarandib is a “transcription” of the Sinhalese *Sinhaladipa* (island of the descendants of lions) (69), while Ceylon was the name given to the island by the British, which was likely a variation of *Ceilão*, as used by the Portuguese (Wright 2007). Ceylon achieved Independence in 1948, but the name was officially changed to Sri Lanka or “resplendent island” in 1972 (Wright 2007).



colonizers gave them during their rule from 1505-1658, trace their lineage to Arab and Persian traders and sailors in South Indian and Sri Lankan coastal regions. These Arab and Persian traders and seafarers visited Serendib, or as *Jeziratul Yakut* (the Island of Rubies), as it was known amongst the Arabs (Ali 2014; de Munck 2005; Wright 2007). The history of the origins of Islam in Sri Lanka is one of “migration” and “conversion” especially as it was enabled through sea trade (Bayly 1989; Schomburg 2004; McGilvray and Raheem 2007).<sup>189</sup> But there is still a popular perception among some Sinhala communities, though, that Muslims “entered the country as invaders” (de Munck 2005, 404).

This movement across the Indian Ocean meant a distinct development of Islam on the coasts of South India and Sri Lanka, which were mainly “Arabic in culture and mercantile in motivation” when compared to Islamization in North India (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 4). These trade links resulted in the spreading of Islam to South and East Asian lands, creating varying manifestations of localized Islamic cultures, heritages and practices while building dynamic relationships between Mecca and Medina in the Arabian Peninsula, the cities of Islam’s origins. Eventually, early male settlers married locally. “Coastal Muslims,” similar to Muslims of South India and of Southeast Asia, were predominantly Sunni Muslims who mainly followed the

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<sup>189</sup> For a historical study of the spread of Islam please see Marshall G. H Hodgson’s seminal study *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Vol. 2), which situates Islam’s expansion in Africa and Southeast Asia and the development of Sufi *tariqas* from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries. For more on Muslim networks across the Indian Ocean please see Engseng Ho’s *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (2006). Ho’s study explores networks across the Indian Ocean that formed the Hadrami Yemeni, which are further linked to itinerant Islamic traditions that developed in Indonesia (Laffan 2011) and Malaysia (Rocci 2011). For Muslim networks that expanded into China please see Patrica Risso (1995) and also Rian Thum (2014). For an excellent photographic depiction of Sufism in China please see *Living Shrines of Uyghur China* (2013).

Shafi'i legal school, while within these communities existed Malay, Bombay and Gujarati Muslim traders (Bohras, Khojas and Memeons) (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 4-6).<sup>190</sup>

Muslims in Sri Lanka remain a minority ethnically, politically and religiously in relation to the majority Sinhala and the larger minority Tamils (de Munck 1994, 2005; McGilvray and Raheem 2007; Haniffa 2008; Thiranagama 2011; Klem 2011).<sup>191</sup> According to the 2012 Sri Lankan census, the majority population on the island is predominately Sinhala (75%) of whom 90% are Buddhist, while others are Christian. Tamils form 11.2% of the population and are religiously Hindu with smaller groups of Christian communities. The island also consists of Indian Tamils who make up 4.2%. The Moor Muslims (a label discussed further below) form 9% of the population while Muslim communities of Burghers (those who trace their lineage to European settlers) and Malays along with those indigenous to the island, known as Vedas, comprise the remaining 1% of the island's population.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> McGilvray and Raheem argue that there is not a predominant Sunni or Shi'a divide in Sri Lanka, besides a "small Gujarati trading communities such as the Bohras, who belong to the Ismaili sect of Shi'ism. Likewise, a Muslim version of the Hindu caste system, common in many parts of India and Pakistan, has never arisen in Sri Lanka, despite the existence of some hereditary Maulana (Seyyid) religious elites and low-status endogamous Barber-Circumciser community (Osta)" (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 12).

<sup>191</sup> Muslims are spread over twenty of the districts of the island but do not form a majority in any of them, but they form a heavy presence in the Eastern Province (i.e., Batticaloa, Amparai and Trincomalee). Please see *The Muslims of Sri Lanka: One Thousand Years of Ethnic Harmony 900-1915* (Dewraja 1994) for more. In Jaffna district settlements included Jaffna Town (Zonahar teru) and Kilinochchi (Hasbullah 1984, 141). For more please see Shahul Hameed Hasbullah's Phd dissertation *The Fertility Behaviour of Muslims of Sri Lanka* (1984) completed at the University of British Columbia in the Department of Geography. In particular please see his appendix where he lists Muslim settlements in Sri Lanka by provinces and districts (1984, 141-144).

<sup>192</sup> Tamil identity politics itself was not unified till soon after Independence. After Independence from the British, debates arose within political parties with regards to voting eligibility of Indian Tamils, or Estate Tamils, Up-Country Tamils or Malaiyaha Tamils and formed the basis of various citizenry laws that added to ongoing legal definitions of who constituted a *Tamil* (see Amarasingam 2013; Bass 2012). A rising concern during this time was the "Indian question" regarding the "state of the Indian Tamils working on the tea plantations" which added to existing tensions between Sinhalese and Tamils (see Bass 2012; Amarasingam 2013, 39). Linguistically there are two majority ethnic groups in Sri Lanka, those who are Sinhalese and those who are Tamil. Amongst the Tamils, shared linguistic identity ends where ethnic and religious ones begin. For instance, Up-country Tamils are a marginalized block in Sri Lanka. These are mainly descendants of Indian Tamils brought to the island from Tamil Nadu by the British to work on tea plantations and who currently work in tea estates. For more on these ethnic and linguistic histories and the contemporary challenges of the Up-country Tamils please see Daniel Bass' *Everyday Ethnicity in Sri Lanka: Up-country Tamil Identity Politics* (2013). Muslims does not identify themselves linguistically as either Tamil or Sinhalese, primarily because of Sri Lanka's ongoing ethnic and linguistic political

From their initial arrival to the island, the early Muslim communities had to negotiate their minority status within a majority Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil Hindu setting. Subsequent colonial enterprises of the Portuguese, who arrived in 1505 and the Dutch in 1658 were most “onerous” and Muslims “were subjected to special penalties and restrictions because of their Islamic faith and the threat they posed to the European monopoly of overseas trade,” thus forcing many coastal Muslims to move inland to the island (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 6). During this early colonial period in the sixteenth century, Tamil speaking Muslim communities were labeled “Moor” (*Mouro*, Moroccan) by the Portuguese who utilized this label throughout their colonies in Africa and Asia, while the label “Mohammedan” or “Mussalman” were also common. Over time, this label became politicized as a means to assert independent representation, especially during British colonial presence centuries later. Ameer Ali<sup>193</sup> writes “The name Moor, an accidental label tagged on to the Muslims by Christian power, now, because of political necessity, turned out to be a blessing and a worthy cause to fight for and maintain a separate identity” (Ali 2014, 374).

In Sri Lanka, then, the label of “Muslims” is used generally (by Muslims and non-Muslims) as a political referent to signal to a distinct ethnic identity on the island that is tied to religion. It is for this reason that studies of Muslims and subsequently Islam in Sri Lanka are viewed through the ethno-political lens, and not solely as a religious identity. One such example

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turmoil between the Sinhalese and Tamils, which is discussed in the text of this chapter. For the most recent Sri Lankan census can be found at: <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/page.asp?page=Population%20and%20Housing> (Accessed August 15, 2014).

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is seen in the lack of scholarship of Sufism, which has provided a rich tapestry of Islamic piety on the island (de Munck 1994, 2005; Asiff 2007; Schomburg 2003; Sahabdeen 1986; Rizvi 1975; Bayly 1989).

### *Serendib: the Land of Adam's Expulsion*

Seafaring traders and itinerant Muslims arrived at the coast of Sri Lanka, known as Serendib, in search of the land that in South Asian Islamic cosmology was connected to Adam. It was understood to be the land where Adam, the patriarch of humanity according to Abrahamic traditions, was expelled to from paradise (Wright 2007; Dunn 2012). These narratives attracted Muslim traders, Sufis and colonialists to partake in pilgrimages to Adam's Peak, the mountain attributed to contain Adam's footprint from his fall. These traditions resulted in the development of further nodes within larger pilgrimage routes across the island. Prominent examples of such Sufi sacred spaces include those associated with Baghdadi saint Abdul Qadir Jilani or the perennial mystic Khidr.<sup>194</sup> Traditions with regards to their connections to sacred space in Sri Lanka forms a significant part of Sufi hagiography, which continues to be embodied today by diverse religious devotees, such as the disciples of Bawa. Despite these historic ties to the island, especially through Sufi narratives, Sufis remain a double minority in Sri Lanka.

The earliest written records of Sufism on the island can be dated back to the writings of the fourteenth century Moroccan traveller Muhammad Ibn Abdullah or Ibn Battuta.<sup>195</sup> During his visit to Ceylon in 1344, he wrote that the people of Sri Lanka "lodge them [*darwishes*] in

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<sup>194</sup> Al-Khidr is an exemplar of spiritual guidance in Sufism and in hagiographies of Sufism in Sri Lanka he appears often. More research is needed on his prominence in Tamil Sufism. Bawa repeatedly evokes and refers to him in his own teaching stories, as seen in *The Guidebook* (1976) where he provides an interpretation of the Qur'anic story of Khidr and Moses (18:60-82). For more on this figure see Hugh Talat Halman's *Where the Two Seas Meet* (2013).

<sup>195</sup> In historical accounts, such as by the sailor Robert Knox in his *Historical Relation of Ceylon* (1681), mention is made of "Moorish beggars" in a "temple" in Kandy while other sources referred to a "Mohammedan hermit" which Asiff Hussein (2007) concludes is likely a reference to "Sufi mendicants" (2007, 376-377).

their houses, and give them to eat and live in their houses amidst their wives and children” (quoted in Hussein 2007, 376).<sup>196</sup> Ibn Battuta visited Ceylon on route to Ma‘bar from the Maldives to participate in a pilgrimage to Adam’s Peak (Dunn 2012, 241-242). Upon reaching the summit, Battuta joined with Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims and shared in a “[...] rare moment of transcendent brotherhood” (Dunn 2012, 242).<sup>197</sup> Susan Bayly (1989)<sup>198</sup> writes

Many Tamils maintain that the Biblical Adam fell to earth somewhere in Ceylon (Sarandib) after being cast out of Paradise: the path he later took from Ceylon to India is said to be marked by the chain of islands off the Tamil coast known as Adam’s Bridge. The Sri Lankan mountain called Adam’s Peak has similar sacred associations for South Asian Muslims. Pilgrims revere a hollowed-out rock, which is hailed as the *nabi’s* [prophet’s] footprint (106).<sup>199</sup>

The historian and Qur’anic exegete Tabari (d. 923)<sup>200</sup> adds in his own commentary “Adam was hurled into Hindustan. In this land there is a mountain called Serandib, and it is reported that

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<sup>196</sup> *Rihla* is travel in quest of ‘ilm or knowledge and so refers to the genre (Euben 2006). The title of this collection is *Tuhfat al-Nuzzar fi Ghara’ib al-Amsar wa-‘Aja’ib al-Asfar*, or *A Gift to Those Who Contemplate the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Traveling*. But *Rihla* is commonly used. For more please see Ross E. Dunn’s *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: A Muslim Traveler of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century* (2012).

<sup>197</sup> Abeydeera (1992) presents a comparative analysis of two voyagers to this sacred pilgrimage site, one Ibn Battuta, “the Islamic voyager” in 1344 and the other a papal legate Jean de Marignolli in 1349. The article explores how Muslim and Christian pilgrims viewed Adam’s Peak through their own doctrinal heritages.

<sup>198</sup> Susan Bayly, a Professor of Historical Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, in her book *Saints, Goddesses and Kings* (1989) provides a detailed analysis of Islamization throughout Tamil Nadu, with reference to Ceylon. Please see her study for more on this.

<sup>199</sup> There have even been suggestions that important South Asian devotional and mystical saints, such as Kabir (d. 1518) and Guru Nanak (d. 1539), visited Sri Lanka, mainly because of the importance of Adam’s Peak, but such claims are difficult to authenticate (Rizvi 1978, 387). According to Islamic tradition, Mount Safa, outside Mecca, is held as the place where Adam landed when he was expelled.

<sup>200</sup> The Persian Abu Ja‘far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (839-923) was an Arabic scholar. He was a child prodigy and travelled until he settled in Baghdad. He was influenced by the Shaf‘i and Hanbali legal schools, but went on to develop his own legalistic interpretations. Tabari is remembered for his two major works, one is the development of

there is no higher mountain in all the universe. Adam landed on this mountain” (quoted in Abeydeera 1992, 70). Tabari describes that it was the leaves that Adam brought with him from paradise that brought the perfume to Ceylon, while it was his tears, because of his separation from God and Eve (Hawwa), that turned into gems that are fragrant across the island (Abeydeera 1992, 70). He continues in his chronicle:

It is said that he [Adam] remained in prayer for a hundred years. Tears streamed down his face and rolled across the mountain of Serandib; to this day, it is the tears streaming down Adam’s face that cause large trees to grow, such as the various myrobolan and other similar shoots that have medicinal properties. Their medicines are used even now, and are brought to us from the mountains of Hindustan (quoted in Abeydeera 1992, 87-88).

According to Muslim understanding of Adam’s Peak, Adam and Eve were expelled from the seventh level of heaven, upon which Adam landed in Sri Lanka leaving a footprint in the rock attributed to this mountain. Adam stayed in Sri Lanka repenting for his sins for a thousand years, when the Archangel Jibril led him to Arabia to reunite with Eve. After they met in Arafat, Adam and Eve returned to Ceylon where they began the human race (Dunn 2012, 242). Due narratives of this metaphysical journey of Adam, Serendib has remained significant for Sufis and Muslims. It was the *awliya* (si. *wali*) or *oliyullah* [Tamil-Arabic variation], the friends of

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Qur’anic exegesis and the second popularly known as the *Annals by the Western World*, documents early Islamic history. For more please see. Bruce Lawrence’s *The Qur’ān: A Biography* (2006) and Rosenthal, Franz, “General Introduction.” In *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, (39 vols. Edited by Ehsan Yar Shater; Vol. 1, General Introduction and From Creation to the Flood, translated by Franz Rosenthal, pp. 5–154. Albany, N.Y., 1989). Faizer, Rizwi. "Ṭabarī, Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World. Oxford Islamic Studies Online*. 07-May-2015. <<http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com.libproxy.wlu.ca/article/opr/t236/e1083>>.

God or saints and their shrines, that were revered, such as that of *shaykh* Uthman Siddqi (dates unknown) in Dawatagaha Mosque in Cinnamon Gardens in Colombo, who visited from Arafat, Arabia to perform a pilgrimage to Adam's Peak (Hussein 2007, 378).<sup>201</sup>

In Susan Schomburg's (2003)<sup>202</sup> study of Tamil Islam in South India and Sri Lanka, she highlights specifically the hagiographic tradition of Abdul Qadir Jilani's reputed visit to Adam's Peak, his sojourn for meditation and then travels in South India prior to his return to Baghdad. The Baghdadi saint Abdul Qadir Jilani is revered as the head of the lineage of the Qadiri Sufi *tariqa* (path). Schimmel (1975) explains that Abdul Qadir Jilani (1088-1166) was from the Caspian Sea and was an "ascetic preacher" who gained popularity as a saint within Islam. She describes him as a "stern sober representative of contrition and mystical fear" while his tomb in Baghdad has become a popular site of pilgrimage (1975, 247). Schimmel continues:

'Abdul'l-Qadir's fame soon reached incredible heights. He is called *Muhyi ud- din*, "the reviver of religion." A charming legend tells how the pious man helped a weak and destitute person who was lying, completely exhausted, on the road; after he had given him some sustenance and almost revived him, that person revealed himself to 'Abdul'l-Qadir as 'the religion of Islam', and hence he gained this honorific title (1975, 247).

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<sup>201</sup> *Shaykh* Uthman Siddqi's tomb was reputed to be discovered in 1820 when a Sinhalese woman broke a pot of oil and tripped and fell in the jungle upon when the saint restored the spilled oil miraculously (Hussein 2007, 378). Hussein mentions some of the following Sufi saints and their shrines in Sri Lanka: *shaykh* Hasan Bin Osman Magdumi whose shrine is at Dargah Town near Aluthgama, *shaykh* Wahabuddin whose shrine is at Pallimulla, Pandamura, Muhammad Husayn Wali whose shrine is at Gintota, Talayan Bawa whose shrine is at Ratmalana and Bawa Kauf whose shrine is at Kahatapitiya, Gampola. There is also Faqir Muhyiddin of Baghdad whose shrine is at Poruva, near Akuressa and Yehya Al-Yamani whose shrine is at Matara (2007, 377). For more details please see Hussein's study.

<sup>202</sup> Schomburg's research focuses on Islamic Tamil history and culture through the use of history, literature and ethnography. Her topics of interest include Tamil Sufism, Hindu-Muslim traditions, Tamil shrine culture and ritual practices, and Tamil women's religious experiences. She was formerly an Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Bates College.

Schimmel relays another tradition from Baluchistan. This one of the *mi'raj*, the night ascension of the Prophet Muhammad to the seven heavens, traditionally said to have been guided by the archangel Gabriel. In this particular rendition of the *mi'raj* it is 'Jilani who came forward to guide Muhammad when Gabriel was unable to continue the journey:

[T]he future founder of the most widespread mystical fraternity in the Islamic world, offered the Prophet his neck that he might step on it to alight without discomfort. Out of gratitude, Muhammad granted the future saint a very special rank: when he would appear on earth for some five centuries later his foot would be 'on the neck of every saint'. Thus 'Abdul Qadir's famous claim to precedence, 'My foot is on the neck of every saint' (Schimmel 1985, 169).

Schomburg suggests that Jilani left Baghdad "for an extended period to pursue ascetic disciplines" and that "it is during this period of his life that he is supposed to have traveled to Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu, according to some Tamil traditions" (2003, 21). She rightly admits that there is no proof to substantiate these hagiographic legends, pointing out through her ethnographic research that her participants understood that Jilani was buried in Baghdad (2003, 27). Still the "shrines" were a site of memorialization of a person not a place of an entombed saint and have formed an embodied reality for devotees who visit and utilize sacred shrines devoted to Jilani (Schomburg 2003, 27; McGilvray 2004).<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Schomburg added that when she pressed her informants they referred to such shrines as "*ninaivu itam*" (place of remembrance) or "*ninaivalayam*" (memorial) while on a regular usage and in material culture (i.e., literature) "*dargah*" (*tarha* or *tarka* in Tamil) was prevalent (2003, 27). This is also the case for disciples and pilgrims of Bawa who visit Mankumban, please see Chapter 6 for more on this.



In Sri Lanka, the site commemorating Jilani's visit is known as Daftther Jailani, or the Rock Cave Mosque (Schomberg 2003; Aboosally 2002; McGilvray 2004; Mauroof 1976).<sup>204</sup> In relaying its tradition, Asiff Hussein<sup>205</sup> writes:

Abdul Qadir is said to have visited Sri Lanka and spent over 10 years in the island in the mountain jungle area of Kurugala, about 15 miles off Balangoda, a spot popularly known as Daftar Jailani. He is said to have practiced meditation in the Soragam Cave which is part of the Dafter Jailani complex. The palm print of the saint is said to be on the Hituvangala Rock while his footprint is said to be found on a higher elevation, on the Soranga Malai. Another spot which is said to mark the saint's visit is the Uppu Kulam or "Salt Pond" not far from Soranga Malai where the water is said to have miraculous healing powers- the influence of the saint's visit (2007, 378).

This cave, according to some local narratives, is the site that Adam ascended to after his reputed six hundred years of meditation and wherein he reconnected with Eve and is the site of the origins of humanity (Mauroof 1976, 25; Dunn 2012). The prominent Indian saint Shahul Hamid<sup>206</sup> was said to have visited Sri Lanka to retrace the steps of Abdul Qadir Jilani from Baghdad to Balangoda and was allegedly guided by the perennial mystic of Islam, Khidr.

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<sup>204</sup> This site is indicated in Figure 4.1 in Chapter 4's map of Sri Lanka as Jailani Mosque.

<sup>205</sup> Asiff Hussein is an anthropologist, linguist, journalist and author. He has published on Islam in Sri Lanka. His publications include *The Lion and the Sword: an Ethnological Study on Sri Lanka* (2001) and *Memons of Sri Lanka: Men, Memoirs, Milestones* (with Hameed Karim Bhoja) (2006).

<sup>206</sup> Shahul Hamid (Tamil: Cakul Amitu Nayakar) was reputedly a thirteenth-generation descendent of Muhiyudin Abd al-Qadir al Jilani. According to some traditions he was born in 1490 in Manikkapur in current Uttar Pradesh, while other dates differ. His shrine in Nagore attracts largely Hindu devotees. A Hindu devotee built the tallest minaret at this shrine. Tamil biographies of this figure associate him with the Hindu saint Mirabai while Muslim traditions also connect him with Khidr. For more on Shahul Hamid see Vasudha Narayanan's "5 Religious Vows at the Shrine of Shahul Hamid" in *Dealing with Deities: The Ritual Vow in South Asia* (2006) edited by Selva J. Raj.

Khidr is known locally as Hayath Nabi Appa or “Our Father, the eternal Prophet” or Hilr Alaihissalam (Khidr) (Hussein 2007, 379; Mauroof 1976, 26). Many local devotees believe that Khidr remains a perpetual youth, and reappears to devotees in cyclical years, especially at his shrine at Kataragama (Mauroof 1976, 26). Local Muslims venerate Khidr Nabi at Kataragama, a sacred site also dedicated to Murukan (Skanda)<sup>207</sup> amongst Hindus, but the mountain also contains a mosque and shrine for “the green saint” of Qur’anic lore, which has drawn international visitors, such as the recently deceased *shaykh* Nazim al-Haqqani (d. 2014) and his followers.<sup>208</sup> For some, such as the Sunil Goonasekera,<sup>209</sup> the presence of Muslims at Kataragama can be traced back at least to the eighteenth century, when Sufi pilgrims from the Middle East and Central Asia visited and likely encountered Sufis known for body piercing rituals (2008, 62). In these sacred spaces in Sri Lanka it is the presence of Sufi *pirs* or *shaykhs*, known locally as “bawas” that form a central orientation of Sufism in Sri Lanka.<sup>210</sup>

The honorific of bawas is commonly used to refer to wandering ascetics often associated with the Rifa‘i Sufis on the island, such as those who engage in self-mortification. In Sri Lanka

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<sup>207</sup> Murukan is the Tamil name for the deity who in Sanskrit is known as Skanda, Subrahmanya, Kumara or Kartikeya (Clothey 1972). The name itself in Tamil was translated as “beautiful, fragrant, young or vibrant one” (Clothey 1972, 80). Murukan is a central figure in Tamil Hindu devotion and piety. For an early study of this please see “Pilgrimage Centers in the Tamil Cultus of Murukan” by Fred W. Clothey in *The Journal of American Academy of Religion* (40 no 1 Mr 1972, p 79-95). For a study that fascinatingly captures the significance of Kataragama and the devotion to Murukan that emerges at this shared site (due to a love story with the female known as Valli) please see “Where Valli Meets Murukan. ‘Landscape’ Symbolism in Kataragama” by Hilde K. Link in *Anthropos* (92, H. 1./3. 1997 pp. 91-100).

<sup>208</sup> Al-Haqqani was a Cyprian leader of the Naqshabandi Order and was influential in establishing Sufi centers in North America, though he was based in Cypriot-Turkey. He was a rather polarizing figure in the Muslim community in America, as he praised leaders like George W. Bush and Tony Blair for fighting terrorism. He supported these leaders because of he was a fervent critic of Wahhabi Islam. For photographs of *shaykh* Haqqani’s visit and the mosque and *mazar* to Kataragama please see <http://kataragama.org/islamic.htm> (Accessed August 2, 2014).

<sup>209</sup> Goonasekera is a Visiting Associate Professor in the Departments of Religion, Sociology, and Anthropology at Bowdoin College in Maine. His publications include *Walking to Kataragama* (Colombo: International Center for Ethnic Studies, 2007) and *George Keyt: Interpretations* (Kandy: Institute of Fundamental Studies, 1991). He has published on Buddhist practice and interreligious exchange in Sri Lanka, pre- and postcolonial Silk Road trade in Sri Lanka, the art and interpretation of George Keyt and Jainism.

<sup>210</sup> When referring to the group of bawas as examples of wandering Sufis in Sri Lanka, I do not use a capital, unlike when I speak about Bawa Muhaiyaddeen.

bawas were common titles in both Rifa'i and Qadiri Sufi orders (Schomburg 2003, 30). McGilvray (2004) captures the annual Kandoori/kanturi festival (death anniversary or *urs*), which commemorates the death of the Baghdadi saint Muhiyadeen *Andavar* (Lord Muhaiyadeen) or Abdul Qadir Jilani.<sup>211</sup> In his studies of the matrilineal clans in Sri Lanka among the Muslim communities, McGilvray speaks of Bawa *faqirs* as a regular feature of the religious topography of Islam in Sri Lanka, especially at Sufi shrines during festivals (2014, 2004). There are many different *tariqas* (brotherhoods) of Sufism, though Qadiri associated with Jilani seems to be the most prominent in Tamil regions (de Munck 2005; Asiff 2007; Schomburg 2003). However, other types also exist, such as Shadhili, Chishti and Naqshabandi. The Rifa'i is also another more prominent type of Sufism on the island, though more associated with *fakirs*, or wandering mendicants, who arrive during special festivals.<sup>212</sup>

In this festival, McGilvray explains the importance of the role and presence of bawa *faqirs* during the celebrations, which include flag rising, *dhikr* (remembrance) and various

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<sup>211</sup> McGilvray's claims about "Brahmi" script found at the Jailani complex (2004) in this published article received much online criticism from varying respondents in the *Colombo Telegraph*, a Sri Lankan newspaper, during 2013. Some, such as Darshanie Ratnawalli ("What Parananvita Said to McGilvray; 'Do Your Homework Son'", August 4, 2013) and Bandu de Silva ("On Kurugala: Robert Knox to McGilvray", June 10, 2013), have strongly criticized McGilvray for his mistranslation of the "Brahmi" script because of his personal relationship with the Jailani Mosque's trustee the Absoosally family. This would have further implications for the landclaims battles unfolding currently at this particular shrine complex in Kuaragala between the Sinhala and Muslim communities, which is further discussed in this chapter's section on contested spaces. McGilvray has since stated that he made a mistake as a scholar by entering the world of translations of epigraphs, which was beyond his area of speciality, though this is not to say that what he wrote about in terms of his ethnographic experience of the Jailani shrine space cannot be gleaned from for my purposes at hand. Further, I do not wish to enter into a discussion about the historical legitimacy of who has rights to this particular space (i.e., Sinhala or Muslims). My research brought me to this site because of Bawa's connection to it, which further captured the tradition of Sufi narratives, attributed to it this site.

<sup>212</sup> For more on the development of Sufi orders in general please see Trimingham's *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (1971). McGilvray (2014) in his recent study also found disciples of Hallaj Monsoor (d. 2005), a Sufi *shaykh* entombed in Androth in Sri Lanka, explaining that their *tariqa's silsila* was "Qadiriyyi Chishti" (252).

Qur'anic recitations to honour Muhiyadeen on this anniversary (2004, 277).<sup>213</sup> He portrays the role of the bawa *faqirs* in their ritual significance:

Concurrent with the lay Rifai *ratib* [musical trope], a professional *ratib* staged by the itinerant Bawas attracts a much larger crowd of onlookers in front of their headquarters near the bazaar junction. The Bawas at Jailani, who mainly come from the east coast towns of Kalmunai and Eravur, depend on donations from the pilgrims for a significant portion of their annual income [...]. Because the Bawas are members of the Rifai order, their *zikr* performance is also called a Rifai *ratib*, but its content and focus differs markedly. It consists of circle of 15 or 20 Bawas led by a main Kalifa and several junior Kalifas, all whom loudly beat tambourines and shout Muslim invocations (e.g. the declaration of faith: *la illaha illallah...*) while three or four Bawas take turns performing ecstatic acts of self-mortification as the crowd looks on (280-281).

In McGilvray's observations above the ritual roles of bawas during Sufi ceremonies at Dafther Jilani are highlighted, wherein Sufis travel to sacred places to participate in important festivals. Due to the vast trade and Sufi networks of pilgrimages and their patrons (i.e., *pirs* and bawas), Sri Lankan Moorish settlements can be found historically in Beruwala, Kalpitiya, Jaffna and other coastal settlements (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 4). Travel, trade and Sufis influenced the development of Islam in Sri Lanka in its early years, though the identity politics of Sri Lanka's religious and ethnic communities became further politicized with the arrival of the British.

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<sup>213</sup> This significance of bawa *faqirs* and its connection to Bawa Muhaiyadeen is further explored in Chapter 7 in relation to Bawa's title of *Qutb*.

*The Rise of Nationalism and the Impact of Islamic Revivalism in the Nineteenth Century*

The British rule began in 1802 in Sri Lanka. During this time some Muslims gained mobility, especially in the areas of business and land ownership (McGilvray and Raheem 2007; Ali 2014). In the 1880s talks of separate representation for Muslims in the Legislative Council was opposed by Tamils. The notion that Muslims were Tamils is often pointed to in the seminal speech given by the Tamil Hindu political leader Ponnambalam Ramanathan (d. 1930). In 1885 he stated that aside from religion, the Moors shared the same “cultural and linguistic” affinity as the Tamils but the Muslims disagreed with this assertion, emphasizing that the communities’ presence in Sri Lanka to Arab origins (Spencer 1990, 8; McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 9). By the late nineteenth century a contingency of Muslim elite from the west coast deliberately used the label of “Ceylon Moors” to claim “seats in the colonial system of communal (i.e., racial) representation” established by the British (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 9). The rhetoric of claiming Muslims under the umbrella of a Tamil ethnic block for a national agenda by the Tamils further led to Muslim communities to consciously represent themselves as distinctively ethnic, further altering identity politics in Sri Lanka.

McGilvray and Raheem write, “Muslim/Tamil acrimony over Ramanathan’s ‘ethnological’ thesis has been festering for well over a century, evoking feelings of ethnic betrayal on the part of Tamil chauvinists, and the LTTE [or Tamil Tigers] in particular, over the Muslims’ alleged disloyalty of the Tamil nationalist cause” (2007, 9). These political and religious tensions point to the complexity of the debates of Muslims as racially ‘Arab’ and/or

“Tamil” (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 11; Thiranagama 2011).<sup>214</sup> This meant that “Muslim” became the common referent in the 1970s while the “popular term, *Sonahar*, an older Tamil and Malayalam word which originally denoted West Asians, especially Arabs or Greeks” was less commonly used.<sup>215</sup> At times “Lanka Yonaka” (Yonaka for Greek) was still used as an “ethnonym” for the Sri Lankan Moors in the 1971 census (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 11). Today both ‘Moor’ and ‘Muslim’ are used interchangeably to refer to indigenous Tamil-speaking Muslim Sri Lankans, “but ‘Muslim’ has now become the predominant usage. This makes the Muslims the only ethnic group in Sri Lanka to proclaim their identity under a solely religious label” (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 11).

Despite these challenges of self-assertion and proper representation in the politics of Sri Lanka, Muslim communities continued to be influenced by institutions of the mosques, Sufi leaders and Indian Muslim trader/missionaries from Kayalpattinam and Kilakarai via South India (McGilvray and Raheem 2007). Still they depended on Christian missionary schools for their educational needs. The latter would shift with Islamic revivalism that formed in the nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century the decline of Muslim power globally and colonial dominance led to various responses by Muslim revivalists and reformists to reassess their marginal presence in their immediate communities. As a response to this decline in power, some political leaders called for a return to a pure Islam, which at times resulted in the purging

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<sup>214</sup> McGilvray and Raheem add “however, by the middle of the twentieth century, a longstanding argument had intensified within the community itself as to whether the term ‘Moor’ or ‘Muslim’ was preferable as a group designation. Nativistic ‘Moor’ partisans incorrectly asserted that the Portuguese applied this term only to racially pure Arabs (Azeez 1907, 4; Mohan 1987, 27-31, 117), and ‘Muslim’ adherents emphasized a broader pan-Islamic religious identity that would ignore race and language, and incidentally, make room for the Malays and Coast Moors” (2007, 11).

<sup>215</sup> *Sonahar*, also transliterated as *Conakar/Jonagar*, was used to label Muslims of the east coast of Sri Lanka. This label likely derived from the Tamil *Sonakam*, a common label for Arabia (Rajamukamatu, 2004, 68-69). For more please see *The Maritime History of the Coromandel Muslims: A Socio-Historical Study on the Tamil Muslims 1750-1900* (Rajamukamtu 2004).

of practices and pieties common historically to local Muslim communities, such as the veneration of saints at their tombs or the devotion to Sufi *shaykhs* (Ali 1981; Sirriyeh 1999; Mandeville 2003; Ali 1981; McGilvray and Raheem 2007).<sup>216</sup>

Ameer Ali (1981) explains that at the end of the nineteenth century Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam on the island were going through “revitalization” periods especially due to the proselytization by Christian missionaries. As Hinduism was being revived through the “literary scholar” Arumuka Navalar, Sinhala nationalism on the island was being solidified in the historical epic of the kings of Sri Lanka of the fifth century, the *Mahavamsa* (Amarasingam 2014, 207; Walters 2000).<sup>217</sup> In this epic Tamils and Sinhala are presented as enemies, and it is only with the defeat of the Tamils that Buddhism prevailed (Spencer 1990, 3; Walters 2000; Amarasingam 2014). Though Tamil nationalism was not tied to religious identity on the island, one finds that Sinhala nationalism has been predicated on the preservation of ethnic and Buddhist identities, which would fully manifest after independence from the British.

Muslim leaders, such as the Muslim activists Siddi Lebbe<sup>218</sup> and I. L. M. Abdul Azeez, also entered into periods of “self-criticism and reforms” (Ali 1981, 5; Thiranagama 2011). It was into this environment that the Egyptian political exile Arabi Pasha was banished by the

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<sup>216</sup> Please see Chapter 1’s discussion on *Anti-Sufism* for more details on this development.

<sup>217</sup> The *Mahavamsa* is the epic chronicle of Vijaya, the first father of the Sinhalese and thus that presents the myth of Ceylon used to affirm the Buddhist-Sinhala national past. For more see Spencer (1990) and De Silva (1981). Jonathan Walters (2000) in his study problematizes linear time as the only framework in which to read these epics related to the Buddha in the *Vamsa* tradition. Walters writes that “[...] the history that is written in these texts is that of the incalculable, the history of the meritorious (and deleterious) action” (106) of kings and monks, based on the Buddha’s “final Cessation” (108). Therefore, the imperative in relaying these traditions of kings by the monastic historians was to affirm “Buddhist practices” which would then have implications for the way in which this sacred narrative is used for a nationalistic myth of Sri Lanka as a Buddhist nation (Walters 2000).

<sup>218</sup> Siddi Lebbe (d. 1898) was a lawyer and “a social worker by inclination” that saw Muslim education as critical for the Muslim community in Sri Lanka. He also established the Tamil newspaper, *Muslim Naisen*, or *The Muslim Friend*, in which he “campaigns for the abandonment of customs” and the “emphasis of the worldwide interests of the Muslims” (Silva, K.M., *A History of Sri Lanka* 2005, Penguin: UK p. 354-355). Lebbe also wrote *Asrar-ul Alaam* (Secrets of the Universe), which showcases his synthesis of Sufi, scientific and modern outlooks.

British to Sri Lanka in 1883 and filled a “leadership gap” (Ali 1981, 6).<sup>219</sup> Arabi’s influence served to “catalyze an Islamic revival” and also to mobilize the development of Muslim schools offering secular, Western-style curriculum (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 9; Thiranagama 2011; Ali 1981).<sup>220</sup> Arabi took unpredictable stances in Ceylon during his exile as he straddled between British colonial rule, Egyptian nationalism and pan-Islamism. One of Arabi’s impacts according to Ali was “[...] by encouraging the Muslim community in their allegiance to the British regime he moved the Muslims out of the emerging nationalist movement and thereby rendered them suspect in the eyes of their former allies (Ali 1981, 7).

In the midst of these growing reforms, Muslims in Sri Lanka were influenced by global Islamic politics. For instance, Ali points to the growing allegiance to the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid Khan, to the extent that the Sultan’s Silver Jubilee was celebrated in Colombo on August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1900 and Abdul Azeez requested the Sultan’s name to be mentioned during *khutbah* (sermons) at mosques (Ali 1981, 6; Thiranagama 2011, 113). The fez cap (*turukki toppi*), common among the Egyptian exiles, was being incorporated by locals as the “‘national’ head wear” and Muslim lawyers fought for the legal right to wear the fez cap instead of the wig in the law courts (Ali 1981, 6). The enthusiasm for the Caliph and the Ottoman Caliphate caused tensions between the religious communities in Ceylon. Even as the Young Turks took over in 1908 and “deposed” the Caliph in 1909, some of the Muslims in Sri Lanka still showed

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<sup>219</sup> Arabi became popular in Colombo as he was showcased on the *Examiner*, wherein his home was referred to as a “mosque” because of the regular streams of Muslim visitors and almost shared a status on par with the Ottoman Sultan according to Ali (1981, 6).

<sup>220</sup> Ali contends it is uncertain the extent to which Arabi “advocated pan-Islamic ideals in Ceylon” but the arrival of Arabi to Ceylon coincided with the outward growth of “pan-Islamic sentiment” as evident in Muslim journals and campaigns for donation to assist the construction of the Hejaz Railway (Ali 1981, 6). The *Muslim Guardian*, a local Muslim journal, suggested that those who do donate funds would receive blessings from God (Ali 1981, 6). The larger role of Arabi within the revivalist sentiment in Sri Lanka is still one that is unclear, though exiled by the British to Ceylon Arabi still supported the British rule in Ceylon, even by attending coronation of the monarchs, and when he returned to Egypt he continued to support the British rule in Egypt (Ali 1981).



interest in Turkish affairs. This leaning came to a head when Turkey declared war on Britain and its allies in 1914 (Ali 1981, 8). The tendency of some Muslims to assert their identity by looking elsewhere, instead of to Sri Lanka (either in the eyes of Sinhala or the Tamils) further marginalized Muslims and their claim to voice in the national discourse of Sri Lanka.

On May 29<sup>th</sup> 1915, the infamous riots between the Muslims and Sinhalese unfolded in Southwestern Ceylon during a Buddhist procession (Kumari 1970; Fernando 1970; Ali 1981; Roberts 1994; Rowell 2009). In the aftermath of the spread of violence against Muslims, Muslim communities sought refuge under the British (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 10). For Ali, the 1915 riots between the Muslim and Sinhala actually point to the presence of another critical fraction. He writes that it was the company of “puritanical Wahhabi movement” that had spread throughout North India in the early nineteenth century that had made its way to the South (Ali 1981, 7).<sup>221</sup> Ali contends that Indian Muslims with Wahhabi influences responded against music near the mosque during the Buddhist procession.<sup>222</sup> There has been no uniform agreement in historical analysis of this riot as to who should be implicated. It must be understood that varying interpretations from within the Muslim communities and the

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<sup>221</sup> According to some scholarship, the first appearance of Wahhabi ideology in an “organized” manner is dated to 1947 to the figure of Abdul Hamid Al-Bakri (1909-1976) from Paragahadeniya, Weuda in Kurunegala District. He was a student of Islamic theology, who spent a decade completing his studies in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. It was likely during his studies that he gained Salafi theological inclinations (Hussein 2007, 386). This led to his movement known as the Jamiyyatu Ansaris Sunnatul Muhammdiyya, based in Paragahadeniya that continues to publish monthly journals (*Unmai Udayam* or *Dawn of Truth*), which first appeared in 1955. More research needs to be completed on these historical developments.

<sup>222</sup> Ameer Ali in his article on the 1915 riots (1981) is adamant that it was “music” that created the tensions citing that “[...] not a single recorded incident of a communal riot between the Ceylon Muslims and the other communities in Ceylon prior to the last quarter of the nineteenth century” warranted any such attention, and therefore states that it is the Indian Muslims who are too blame, and not the indigenous Sri Lankan Muslims (10). Ali’s argument that it was only the Wahhabi presence that incited the riots in 1915 must be situated with his own personal politics. Ali is a public figure in the Muslim community in Australia and has been a staunch critic against any Islam that is not interpreted for the modern context. He has publicly called for the banning of the *hijab* by the Australian government and for the reinterpretation of the Qur’an and the role of the Prophet Muhammad as an infallible human being by Muslims. Ali’s most recent public piece was entitled “Muslims can make the Pen Mightier than the Sword” (2015) in *The Australian*, which was written after the Charlie Hebdo incident in Paris, France. <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/muslims-can-make-the-pen-mightier-than-the-sword/story-e6frg6zo-1227191285228> (Accessed May 8, 2015).

indigenous ethnic groups clashed leading to riots, variations of such events would continue to unfold for much of the later part of the twentieth century.

During this time, tensions were already high as attempts were made to remove Hindu and even Tamil features in Islamic practice and to adopt Urdu as the primary language of Muslims in South Asia (Ali 1981, 7). Yet this did not succeed in Ceylon where Tamil was further supported by revivalists such as Azeez who advocated it as the language of the “orthodox *ulema*” when preaching to the people (Ali 1981, 7). Tamil was the language utilized by Muslim communities in Sri Lanka, while Arabic was also integrated as the literary and ritual language. This coexistence of Arabic and Tamil in Arabic script was a common development across Muslim communities in Tamil Nadu regions of South India and Sri Lanka which overtime resulted in the use of Arabic to phonetically sound out Tamil known as *Arwi*.<sup>223</sup> Azeez encouraged Tamil as the language of Muslims in Ceylon. But he was critical of other practices common in Ceylon, such as *mawlid* (birthday of the prophet and Muslim saints) celebrations and other festivals such as *kanturi* (death anniversary or *urs*). As a result, his opponents labeled him a “wahhabi” (Ali 1981, 8).<sup>224</sup> Despite these early difficult religious dynamics, both internally amongst the Muslims and externally with the Sinhala and Tamil communities, the

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<sup>223</sup> For more on these developments between Tamil and Arabic please see Ronit Ricci’s “Saving Tamil Muslims from the Torments of Hell: *Vannapparimalappulavar’s* Book of One Thousand Questions” in *Islam in South Asia in Practice* edited by Barbara Metcalf (2009), *Muslim Contributions to Tamil Literature* (Uwise 1990), *Arabic, Arwi and Persian in Sarandib and Tamil Nadu: A Study of the Contribution of Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu to Arabic, Arwi, Persian and Urdu Languages* (Alim 1993) and for an example of Tamil-Islamic literature see Paula Richman’s excellent analysis “Veneration of the Prophet in an Islamic Pillaitamil” in *The Journal of American Oriental Society* (1993) and *The Sufi Doctrine in Tamil Literature* by A.M Mohamed Sahabdeen (1986). For linguistic developments please see “Arabic-Tamil in South India and Sri Lanka: Language as Mimicry” (1993) in *Islamic Studies* (Vol. 32, No. 2 pp. 169-189) and “English and the Muslims of Sri Lanka: Language as National Animator and International Interface” (2000) in *Islamic Studies* (Vol. 39, No. pp. 121-138). Additional regional, political and cultural features also impacted the development of distinct Muslim communities in Tamil Nadu regions of South India and Sri Lanka (Ricci 2009; Schomburg 2003; Sahabdeen 1986; Rizvi 1975; Bayly 1989).

<sup>224</sup> I return to these discussions of sectarian differences, especially as it challenges Sufism, further below where I engage with contemporary contestations of Sufi spaces.

ethnic conflicts on the island would only worsen with the dawning of Independence from Britain in 1947.

### *Independence and the Eelam Wars*

The Ceylon Independence Act of 1947 granted Ceylon autonomy from the British. S.W.R.D Bandaranaike led the first election in Ceylon and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) won (Amarasingam 2014, 208). With his run for elections again in 1956 the concern of language remained significant as ever, especially since many minority Tamils, who were fluent in English, held nearly 33% of civil jobs to the dismay of the Sinhala (Amarasingam 2014, 208). Tamils sought equal recognition of Sinhala and Tamil as official languages after independence, but this was not the case. Concerns of bureaucratic jobs being dominated by Jaffna Tamils and the growing wave of Sinhala-dominated political parties led to the declaration of Sinhala as the only official language of Sri Lanka in 1956, causing ethno-linguistic communal riots between Sinhala and Tamils in the east (Spencer 1990, 1-2; Amarasingam 2013, 45).<sup>225</sup>

In these debates Muslims did not maintain a unified voice. Muslims in different districts and provinces experienced different circumstances. Muslim politics developed differently in the Southwest (dominant Sinhala presence) in relation to the Northeast (dominant Tamil presence). In the northeast Muslim politicians, even after independence, switched political affiliations readily, further souring relations with their Tamil neighbours (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 16). These language debates led the impetus by “southwestern urban Muslim political elites” to separate schooling for the Muslim community, especially in technical training for jobs.

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<sup>225</sup> One of the larger riots that resulted was in 1958 when 25, 000 Tamils were moved from predominant Sinhala regions to Tamil areas in the north, resulting in a momentary concession to the recognition of Tamil as a language in Ceylon in the Tamil Language Act which was later revoked (Amarasingam 2013, 47-48).

However, separate schooling further divided the encounters of Muslims with other ethnic communities (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 15). For example, Razik Fareed rose up as a Muslim spokesman and political leader after independence and supported the Sinhala only language policy.<sup>226</sup> He commented that otherwise it would be an act of “political genocide” by the Tamils for the Muslims, as the Muslims already separated their shared linguistic ties with Tamils and stressed their Muslim identity as a separate ethnic marker (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 14).

In the 1970s discriminations evident in the new constitution (i.e., university admissions that discriminated against Tamils and promoted pro-Sinhala hiring) culminated in the rise of Tamil militancy (Amarasingam 2013, 55-56). These new amendments in the proposed constitution equally affected Tamil speaking Muslims, especially in the northeast, as new district reorganizations excluded Muslim populations, further signaling to systematic marginalization of Tamils and Muslims (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 16). When the new constitution was officially passed on May 22, 1972, violent riots and protests unleashed in the northern and eastern provinces (Amarasingam 2013, 57-58). During this period many different militant groups began to emerge as the new constitutional amendments agitated Tamil youth. Some of these concerns were addressed when the constitution was amended again in 1978, but by then the tensions had boiled over and it was “too little too late” (Amarasingam 2013, 63).

Of the militant groups to form due to this backlash one was the group led by Velupillai Prabhakaran. This group was first known as the Tamil New Tigers (TNT) but later as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE or Tigers) and it is this group that became the dominant militant force in Sri Lanka’s civil war. In July of 1975, Prabhakaran assassinated the

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<sup>226</sup> For more on Razik Fareed please see McGilvray and Raheem (2007, 14).

mayor of Jaffna Alfred Duraipappah catapulting him to fame on the island (Amarasingam 2013, 58). This was only the beginning of the many attacks executed by the Tamil Tigers resulting in the government passing the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) in 1979. It was legalized in 1982 and allowed for the “arrest and question of ‘suspected terrorists’ without judicial oversight” (Amarsingam 2013, 58). The bulk of these conflicts unfolded in the Jaffna Peninsula, known as the Tamil Heartland. In the north, violence escalated in the 1980s leading to assassinations of political candidates by Tamil militants during the height of critical district elections. It also led to deaths of police officers that resulted in days of rioting and arson and the attack of the Jaffna Public Library.<sup>227</sup> By June 1981 Prabhakaran, who emerged as the key leader of a growing Tamil nationalist militant movement, fled to India and would not return to Sri Lanka until January of 1987.

Violent events such as Black July<sup>228</sup> and other acts of brutality became the norm in the 1980s to the 1990s. Tamil militants attacked Sinhala communities and spaces (i.e., the sacred Buddhist pilgrimage site of Anuradhapura in 1985) as the state, army and Sinhala people retaliated. As vicious attacks between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government continued, LTTE also started to believe that the Muslims in the north and east were covertly sharing

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<sup>227</sup> Amarasingam writes “the burning of the Jaffna library in May 1981 is etched in the minds of many Tamils in the diaspora as an example of a long-running ‘cultural genocide’ by the Sinhalese majority against the Tamil community” as over 90, 000 volumes of rare Tamil manuscripts were lost in the blaze (2013, 65-66).

<sup>228</sup> Black July is one of the most critical events that accelerated the development of the civil war in Sri Lanka. It resulted when soldiers attacked Seelan, ranked number two next only to Prabhakaran in the echelons of the LTTE. Wounded and unable to escape the army, Seelan asked another LTTE cadre to kill him to prevent him from falling into enemy hands (Amarasingam 2013, 67). Having heard of this, Prabhakaran and his LTTE responded by executing an attack on an army patrol near the Jaffna-Palali road killing thirteen soldiers. Though President Junius Richard Jayewardene attempted to keep the return of the bodies from the Jaffna to Colombo and the funeral a low key affair, the delay in the return of the bodies and the subsequent cancellation of the funerals on July 24<sup>th</sup> culminated in mass violence; mobs attacked Tamil shops, homes, and people and the riots continued for a week (Amarasingam 2013, 68-69). In the midst of these riots, the most “famous incident” was the entry of Sinhalese prisoners into cells of Tamil political detainees in Welikade maximum-security prison and the killing of thirty-five inmates with “knives and clubs” as guards watched, which was repeated again two days later leading to the death of another eighteen Tamil prisoners (Amarasingam 2013, 69).

information about the LTTE to the government. McGilvray and Raheem explain, “although the conventional narrative portrays the Muslim community as supporting the state in the Eelam Wars, the situation on the ground was far more complex. Muslims found themselves victimized as the conflict intensified” (2007, 19). Some Muslim youth were said to have joined the Tamil militants freely while others joined by force (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 19).<sup>229</sup>

This period saw a series of pogroms by the Tamil Tigers against their Muslim neighbours. On August 3, 1990, one hundred and forty Muslims in a mosque in Kattankudy were killed by the LTTE and days later 122 Muslims were killed in Eravur. Both of these events eventually led to the expulsion of all Muslims from Jaffna on November 30, 1990, with only two hours for those in Jaffna to evacuate while other districts were given one to two days (see Thiranagama 2011; Amarasingam 2013, 96).<sup>230</sup> This led to the displacement of nearly 65 000 Muslims during this period (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 22).<sup>231</sup> Sharika Thiranagama (2011)<sup>232</sup> captures the displacement of Muslims from the north and their lives currently in internally displaced camps near Puttalam. One of Thiranagama’s participants explains their experience of the expulsion:

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<sup>229</sup> The exact nature of Muslim involvement during this time is still contested and debates by various scholars can be found in *Dealing with Diversity: Sri Lankan Discourses on Peace and Conflicts* (Frerks and Klem 2004) in which parallel narratives are presented. For instance, some say that Muslim youth were forced into fighting for Tamil nationalism while others voluntarily joined.

<sup>230</sup> For more on the expulsion please also see *The Quest for Redemption: the Story of the Northern Muslims* (2011), which is a report completed by the Citizen’s Commission and published by the Law & Trust Society in Colombo.

<sup>231</sup> Muslims in the Northern Province, such as Jaffna Town, historically have made up five percent of the overall population of Sri Lanka up until their expulsion in 1990 by the LTTE. When they were expelled by the LTTE in 1990, the displaced Muslims were living in camps in Kalpitiya and Puttalam Town (Thiranagama 2011; McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 7).

<sup>232</sup> Sharika Thiranagama is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Stanford University. She has written extensively on the Sri Lankan civil war and its many facets. She has also been the organizer of the Sri Lanka Graduate Student Conference that brings graduate students from across the United States and Canada together to engage in dialogue and foster collaborations. Part of the conference includes a dissertation workshop with PhD candidates who are about to enter fieldwork participate. I was fortunate enough to be part of this workshop in 2012, which provided much insight for the current project.

[...W]ithout any warning and without any kind of charge or accusation against our people, the LTTE announced that every single Muslim man, woman and child must leave their homes and go out of the province. They were ordered to leave their possessions behind. All their money and jewelry and household goods had to be left behind. If anyone disobeyed the order, the penalty was to be death (quoted in Thiranagama 2011, 127).

The expulsion of the Muslims from the northern province meant that the presence of Islam is less documented in the predominantly Tamil regions of northern Sri Lanka, wherein our case study is centered. With the expulsion of Muslims from the north, many of their narratives were displaced with them, presenting new challenges to gathering these oral histories amongst internally displaced Muslims. The expulsion of the Muslims from the north was the last straw that ended Tamil-Muslim alliances, such brutal treatment by the LTTE prompted many Muslims to join the Sri Lankan army to serve the state. Pogroms against the Muslim communities and their displacement in 1990 point to the complexity of Muslims' position in Sri Lanka: "between accommodation with the state or joining an alliance with 'Tamil-speaking peoples'" (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 23).

A new Muslim political group, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) formed and attempted to stand for "Muslim nationalism" as a response to "Sinhala and Tamil ethnonationalist movements" (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 19). And though Prabhakaran met with SLMC, leading to the creation of the Prabhakaran-Hakeem accord (Rauf Hakeem the then leader of the SLMC), which included the ability of the northern Muslims to return, this accord fell through and became "in the Muslim eyes a symbol of Tamil betrayal" (Jeyaraj quoted

McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 36). In the east other forms of dialogues also spawned “between the Muslim civil society organizations and the LTTE” aimed at addressing the localized needs of Muslims in the provinces but even this became problematic as Muslim politicians were not pleased with efforts by local committees to oversee such initiatives (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 39-40). Talk of separate homeland for Muslims were rare and never did fully mobilize in the way that it did for Tamil nationalism. At least not until some Muslim students from South-Eastern University in Oluvil, on the east coast of Sri Lanka, sought such ideals under the Oluvil Declaration of January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2003. Some of these elements were eventually adopted by the SLMC (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 41).<sup>233</sup>

During this period, reports also began to surge of “jihadist” groups and armed Muslim youth, some with affinity to “Salafist orientation”, who reputedly “destroyed” Sufi shrines and attacked Sufis. News reports of community violence were also suggested between 2006-2007 between “Islamic fundamentalists and Sufi mystics” in Kattankudy (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 42-43). But as McGilvray and Raheem explain “No major Sri Lankan Muslim religious political parties per se operate” though Muslim politicians hold positions in government, they do not stand on Islamic platforms and “while there may be some vociferous preachers, no conclusive evidence of militant or violent Islamist movements have been found” (2007, 13). Much of these speculations of “jihadist” movements have been media propaganda, giving

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<sup>233</sup> The expulsion was the beginning of a series of acts that gained international attention for the LTTE, who used suicide bombers to assassinate Rajiv Gandhi in India and President Premadasa in Colombo on May 1st, 1993 (for more see Amarasingam 2013, 101). These were only the beginning of a series of attacks orchestrated by the LTTE, which included attacks on the Central Bank of Colombo in 1996, along with the take over of cities and regions such as Mullaitivu, Mankulam and Kilinochchi, the latter which would be the headquarters of the LTTE until their fall in January 2009. In between the height of Eelam Wars, peace talks were brokered. Peace talks brokered by the Norwegian government and initiated by the LTTE resulted in a unilateral ceasefire on December 24, 2001 and led to a series of peace talks from 2002 to 2003 (Amarasingam 2013, 109-110). During these peace talks, the Muslim political leaders sent independent Muslim delegation in an effort to assert their presence in the broader conflict (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 32).



reason for the violence by extremist Buddhist nationalists against Muslim communities. To date there is no substantial evidence on the growth of these “jihadists” groups, though research on such topics in Sri Lanka is sparse to start with, but with growing economic ties to Saudi Arabia, research needs to be conducted on the ground to understand the immediate impacts of these economic networks’ influence on Islam in practice in Sri Lanka.

Muslim presence within this narrative is further politicized, as seen above, for they have had to straddle the politics of two ethno-linguistic communities and nationalisms while attempting to assert their own ethnic identity through their religious identity. Thus though the war may be over, the long lasting terror of a war that was experienced by several generations of Tamils, Sinhala and Muslims continues to dominate the national consciousness of a people who are attempting to forge ahead within a Sinhala state in which the future presence of minorities, such as Tamils and Muslims, remains precarious as ever.

### **From Politicization to Veneration: Sacred Spaces in Contemporary Sri Lanka**

On August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2013, just after Eid, or *nonbupperunaal*, an “unknown gang” of nearly two hundred people with iron rods and swords reputedly attacked the Grandpass Mosque at Swarna Chaitya (Hospital) Road in Colombo. The mob threw stones at the mosque and at Muslims returning from evening prayers, injuring several, including two policemen, who had to be taken to the Colombo General Hospital for treatment. The green four-story building, which was previously used as storage, was now functioning as a mosque despite ongoing contestations of its use between local Muslims and Buddhists. Its window panels were shattered, while several nearby houses and businesses were also damaged. The Grandpass neighbourhood in Colombo 14 is distinctively known as a Muslim area but with Sinhala, Tamil, Malay and Burghers who

coexist peacefully. Muslims also own the majority of the shops in the area. The Sebastian Canal divides the neighbourhood itself. The canal runs through Colombo 14, which contains several bridges that connect to a predominately Sinhala area of the neighbourhood, evident by the Buddhist temple. Police and Special Forces (STF) were sent to control the rising tensions after the attack and a curfew was enforced during the late evenings and removed in the early mornings for several days soon after. STF were also guarding the Sebastian Canal bridges between the two communities as well as in the Grandpass Mosque area.

Being nearby, my cousin drove me on his motorbike to see what had resulted the next morning after the attack. The scene was chilling as Muslim youth stood on one side of the dusty street, some with machetes, with rage in their faces, while Buddhist monks stood on the other, with police and STF scattered throughout with AK47s watching on casually. Some Muslim leaders and Buddhists monks stood in the middle attempting to dispel the threat of a riot, though the tension could be felt deeply in the air. Business owners and residents awaited in front of their properties, some with young children in their arms, looking on for any signs of what was to transpire next in what were supposed to be the festive days of the end of Ramadan. Such scenes as the one just described, and the more recent attack of Sri Lankan Muslims in Aluthgama by extremist Buddhists, have become a reality of post-war Sri Lanka.<sup>234</sup> The Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), a militant Buddhist nationalist movement, has been one such group that has led negative propaganda against Muslim communities. These recent attacks on Muslims and their places of veneration and business on the island are reminiscent of a history of Muslim persecution dating back as early as the infamous riots that unfolded between the Muslims and

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<sup>234</sup> See “Sri Lanka Muslims killed in Aluthgama clashes with Buddhists” <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-27864716>. (Accessed July 29th, 2014).

Sinhalese on May 29<sup>th</sup> 1915, or the more recent expulsion of the Muslims from the north by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE or Tigers) in 1990.

With the rising threat against Muslim communities, Islamic spaces and Muslim communities across the island have recently been facing threat and Sinhala-Buddhist extremism has been on the rise. This also has meant that historically shared spaces and those associated with Sufism are also caught in the crossfire of erasure. For instance, Adam's Peak or Baba Adam-*malai* (mountain of Adam) as was known historically by Muslims, is a site of conflict due to contestations over ownership of the sacred space. This mountain has acquired other names, such as Shiva's Peak (*Shivanoli Patha Malai* or the peak of the foot of the light of Shiva), Pico de Adam and St. Thomas' Peak (who is attributed to have brought Christianity to



Figure 4.2: Dafter Jailani cave mosque in Balangoda, Sri Lanka. Notable are the debris from the recently removed sanctuary for Khidr. Photograph taken by author, August 2013.

the east) (Wright 2007). Adam's Peak holds an alternative significance for Buddhists on the island who believe that it is Buddha's footprint on the mountain, hence it is known as *Sri Pada*, "the Auspicious Foot" (Wright 2007). These varying interpretations have led to land claims to the space and its pilgrimage routes, which add to the already prevalent religious tensions in Sri Lanka and fears continue to rise in terms of what will become of these historically significant shared spaces amongst Muslims and Buddhists.

Dafter Jailani, discussed above, is another site that is caught between Sinhala and Muslim communities who have fought for landclaim rights, as both communities have attributed religious significance to this space.<sup>235</sup> For the Muslims, particularly the Sufis, this mountain shrine contained a sanctuary for Khidr Nabi, along with various unmarked tombs and *masjids*.<sup>236</sup> When I visited Dafter Jailani during my fieldwork in August 2013, I found army men scattered across the complex tending to archival work. I also found the remains of the demolition that had taken place months earlier as reported to me by locals who were spending time at the shrines (Figure 4.2 and 4.3). Having seen photographs and videos of this historic site prior to my visit, it was daunting to see all the flags removed from the large mountain top complex surrounded by jungle. I was told an elephant was brought to remove the sacred flagpole that used to be on top of the mountain peak, which I later saw lying twisted on my

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<sup>235</sup> For more on this please also see "Midweek Politics: The Battle for Sacred Ground" (April 10, 2013) in *Colombo Telegraph* by Dharisha Bastians via <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/midweek-politics-the-battle-for-sacred-ground/> (Access June 12, 2015). For a letter from the current trustee of the shrine, Roshan Aboosally, to the former President Mahinda Rajapakse and photographs of the demolition of the sites please see "Pictures of the Kuragala Islam Holy Site Demolition" (May 17, 2013) via <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/pictures-of-the-kuragala-islam-holy-site-demolition/> (Accessed June 12, 2015).

<sup>236</sup> The book *Dafter Jailany* (2002) by M. L. M Aboosally includes varying local narratives of this mountain top shrine complex, including lists of names of Sufi saints along with colonial visitors. Please see it for more details of these oral narratives. Aboosally and his family is the trustee of this shrine complex. This text should be interpreted as a primary source that captures hagiographic traditions of Dafter Jailani and other shrines in Sri Lanka and not necessarily as archaeological and historical proofs. Needless to say, religious devotion and veneration is predicated on belief more than it is on archaeological proof, and so such a text captures some of the Sufi centers of piety.

climb up to Soragam Cave. Demolished building complexes with debris were left to the local community of devotees who had to clean and sort them aside.

During my visit, the main mosque complex remained. Notable amidst this deconstruction of a sacred Islamic site were Muslim and non-Muslim women from the nearby village, who were dispersed around cave mosque some with infant children in their arms, either praying or just sitting in the space. Some children were playing in the debris of buildings nonchalantly, unaware of severity of this situation, as seen in Figure 4.2. One of the buildings that were removed was Khidr Nabi's sanctuary, which was in the cave beside the main complex. The main sanctuary itself contains a tomb for a Darwesh Mohiyaddeen Oliuallah a saint from Yemen dated to 883.



Figure 4.3: Tombs being removed in Dafther Jailani. Photograph by author, August 2013.

These sacred sites associated with saints of Islam are prominent places of pilgrimages and have been historically, especially due to the belief of *karamat*, or miracles, attributed to the saints who form the basis of veneration at Sufi shrines.<sup>237</sup> For instance, the miraculous story, and there are many, associated with Soragam Cave at Dafter Jailani is of a eight year child who fell into this deep and dark cave where mendicants were said to have spent years meditating (Bawa was said to have meditated in this cave). When the child was rescued after two days she reputedly said that “*appa vandal pal tanda*” (father came and gave me milk) and became known as the “Lady of the Cave” (Hussein 2007, 383). As a result of such miracles attributed to his sacred site and personage, Jilani is often revered as “*Ghwathul Azam*” or “great saviour” and *mawlid* celebrations for the Prophet Muhammad in honour of Jilani are significant ritual practices. This was the case not only as they are held annually at Dafter Jailani but also I found throughout my fieldwork that many Muslim families in Sri Lanka hold monthly or even weekly *mawlid* celebrations for Jilani in their homes. They invite Qur’an reciters, *maulvi* (imams) or Sufi *shaykhs* to participate in these celebrations. I highlighted this particular devotion to the Prophet Muhammad and Abdul Qadir Jilani as a distinct mark of the Fellowship in Philadelphia. This is a practice adopted by Bawa in his early ministries in Sri Lanka.<sup>238</sup> The demolition of portions of Dafter Jailani and the ongoing contestation over landclaims of this site emphasize the ongoing conflicts that unfold in and through land and geography in an effort to narrate a particular national past. Sufi spaces on the island that have been sites of pilgrimage are not only caught in-between extreme nationalistic violence, they are also wedged in the middle of revivalist and reformist tendencies of some Muslims.

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<sup>237</sup> Please see Chapter 3’s discussion of pilgrimage and shrine practices for more on saint veneration at shrines.

<sup>238</sup> I highlight these trends further in Chapter 5 and 6 in Jaffna and Mankumban.

### *Contesting Sufism in Order to Claim an Authentic Islam*

Despite the pervasive presence of Sufism in Sri Lanka, anti-Sufi sentiments have grown in Sri Lanka, especially as they are advocated by “[...] Muslims subscribing to Salafi ideas, known in popular parlance as ‘Tawhid people’” while Sufi groups are often locally referred to as the “*tariqah* movement” (Hussein 2007, 386). McGilvray and Raheem further add that the growing presence of Wahhabi influence is due likely to Saudi Arabia:

Many in the Muslim community also share the view that various forms of Wahhabi and Salafist influence are entering Sri Lanka directly or indirectly from Saudi Arabia by concealed channels of money and proselytization [...]. Sri Lankan mosques, like those in most parts of South Asia, commonly house the tombs of local saints to whom vows are made and for whom annual death anniversary festivals (*kandooris* or *urs*) are performed. In recent decades, some of these saintly shrines have been condemned as idolatrous (*shirk*) and have been demolished in the name of Islamic purification. Most of the major Sufi festivals, such as at Daftar Jailani near Balangoda, and at the Beach Mosque Shrine near Kalmunai on the east coast, are still popularly celebrated, but everyone is aware of strong fundamentalist opposition to them (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 13).<sup>239</sup>

It is likely that revivalist and reformist influences are arriving from both Saudi Arabia and India, where economic ties and mobility among Muslims remain prominent, especially as migrant labour and workers from Sri Lanka have moved to Saudi Arabia in hopes of upward

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<sup>239</sup> Please see Chapter 1 discussion of *Anti-Sufism* for more on this.

economic mobility. In the current Islamic landscape of Sri Lanka, movements such as Tablighi Jama'at a "pietist movement" with connections to South Asia where it originated, and Jamaat-i-Islam (from Pakistan), are active and attempting to disseminate orthodox practices of Islam (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 13; De Munck 1994, 2005; Haniffa 2008).<sup>240</sup> The latter is an area in which more research is needed in contemporary Islam in Sri Lanka, but emerging studies are situating the varying processes that impact Islamic identity and community formation in contemporary Sri Lanka.

For instance, Bert Klem (2011)<sup>241</sup> explores religion, politics and identity through a case study of Akkaraipattu, a town on Sri Lanka's east coast. Akkaraipattu is a significant site because Muslims form a local majority in this town (2011, 731).<sup>242</sup> Klem found that many Sufi adherents were anxious of the Tawhid Jama'at or the Muslim reform movements who were critical of Sufi practices (2011, 742). The Tablighi Jama'at is leading the "Islamization process" in this region and Muslim members of the community have noticed the changes in "public displays of Islam" from the dress (both men and women), to haircuts and beards (Klem 2011, 744). The Tablighi Jama'at, along with Jamaat-i-Islam and Tawhid Jamaat have been prominent in the Akkaraipattu, dating back to the 1970s (Klem 2011, 744). The Tablighi Jama'at, however, is building a mosque specifically for their own movement and "aim to "purify" Islam

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<sup>240</sup> The Tablighi Jama'at (TJ) founded by Maulana Muhammad Ilyas was established in 1867. The Deoband *madrasa* became known for its reform movement, which called upon Muslims to closely follow the "Prophetic model" and to leave behind "un-Islamic" customs" (Sikand 2007, 131). The Deobandi *'ulama* were Sufi *shaykhs* who "sought inner cultivation" and "were fundamentally concerned with the returning of *shari'a* to *tariqa* and Ilyas would set the foundations of the TJ as spreading the teachings of the Deobandis but through "popular preaching" (Sikand 2007, 131; Kugle 2007; Metcalf 2002). It has a dominant presence globally now and emphasizes missionary activity (*da'wa*). The creed of the movement can be summarized in his quote "O Muslims, become Muslims" (Klem 2011, 744). For more see *Global Political Islam* by Peter Mandaville (2007). Farzana Haniffa's article "Piety as Politics amongst Muslim Women in Contemporary Sri Lanka" (2008) explores the role of female participants in *da'wa* (missionary) work of al-Muslimaat in Colombo.

<sup>241</sup> Klem is a Researcher at the University of Zurich and writes on contemporary politics in Sri Lanka.

<sup>242</sup> In Akkaraipattu, Muslim traders settled and married local women, while a Yemeni *shaykh* also helped spread Sufism in its region (Klem 2011, 737).



from “undesirable” customs that Islam has blended with during the centuries of its expansion. Sufi practices like mysticism, meditation and saint worship are tolerated as an advanced form of Islam, but they are not encouraged” (Klem 2011, 744). Despite concerns over practices of orthodoxy and heterodoxy in the east, Klem found that:

Muslims have to cling on to their history, they explained, because they are under threat from Sinhala and Tamil nationalists, who argue that Muslims are not from this soil. Shrines like the one in Ambalattaru are pivotal for the Muslims’ sense of belonging and they play a vital role in contemporary interpretations of “ancient” history (2011, 742).

Therefore the mosque, which also serves as a shrine such as that in Ambalattaru, gained a “new significance in the region’s ethno-political field” (2011, 742). He explains:

Genealogy, belonging and the historical nexus between place and religion became paramount for a minority community that perceives itself as “under siege”. Rather than a mere prayer house, the mosque provides meaning to contemporary notions of place and belonging, a boundary between “us” and “them”. It became a marker of a discourse that implicitly emanates notions like “traditional homeland” and “sons of the soil”, both dominant features of Tamil and Sinhala nationalism (2011, 742).

The shrine’s reconstruction project was itself an attempt by Muslim politicians to gain legal rights to land through religious buildings, such as mosques and Sufi shrines (2011, 746). These overall projects highlight how the Tablighis in the same community avoid the “ethnicity

project” altogether because the “Muslim identity” transcends national boundaries to unify with the “global umma” and so their ideology steers clear of “territory” and “genealogy” (Klem 2011, 745-746). Those in charge of the mosque federation are very much focused on “local” and so focus on “uniting the community and shutting out divisive influences and external threats” (Klem 2011, 745).

Concerns grow in the Muslim community of Akkaraipattu of “the struggle between dissatisfied armed youth falling pray to fundamentalism on one hand and liberal peaceful cosmopolitan Muslims on the other” yet amidst these larger dilemmas of ethnic, religious and political leanings Klem writes:

there are intra-Muslim fissures, contradictory political outlooks, paradoxical notions of purity and different ways of defining ingroup and outgroup. Rather than a dichotomy of two fronts (be they labeled as traditional/modern, radical/ moderate, piety/politics, or fundamentalist/secular), people position themselves in different ways as they navigate their everyday life in a context that oscillates between violent skirmishes and periods of relative peace. They employ different discourses to engage or disengage with politics and if their principles do not suit the situation, they find pragmatic ways to circumvent them. What is deeply political at one instance may re-appear as pious the next, depending on the occasion (Klem 2011, 751).

Klem’s study highlights that there is no singular trajectory in which Muslims in this region formed their identities and practices or their sacred spaces. Sufi shrines themselves are “ethno-territorial marker in the politics of place” in Sri Lanka, which is seen from historical sites such

as Adam's Peak to Dafter Jailani (Klem 2011, 745). They can only be understood by accounting for the larger ethnic reality of Muslims and their physical location within a geo-political space that sees no room for their presence, while the Muslim landscape, which has historically been dominated by Sufi venerations, itself is changing, adapting and being influenced by global Islamic reformist movements.

The latter points to the spectrum of approaches and understandings of Sufism amongst communities in Sri Lanka that have been conflated, historically and at present. For example, Rapti Siriwardane (2014)<sup>243</sup> calls attention to the language of “Arabisation” of Islam in Sri Lanka, especially through the “attire such as the *abaya* or *niqab*” (i.e., due to labour migration to Saudi Arabia). She emphasizes that, “these discourses have conflated older anti-Muslim rhetoric with new anti-Islamic strands, the former expressing particular grievances with respect to ethnicised communalism, the latter focusing on religious doctrinal elements characterized as being ‘inherently dangerous’ (Anon, 2013:1)” (Siriwardane 2014, 11). It is these studies that have “uncritically typecast and conflated transnational cultural flows with religious-piety movements (and funding)” and which have been described by Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist or even scholars as “orthodoxy” or “doctrinal purism” (Siriwardane 2014, 2).<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Rapti Siriwardana is a Junior Researcher at the Center for Development Research at the University of Bon. Her research themes are governance, mobility and migration and social and cultural change and adoption. Her research areas are primarily Malaysia, Singapore and Sri Lanka. She also teaches anthropology of development, political ecology, life history research and narrative analysis and visual ethnography.

<sup>244</sup> Within this fall discussions of the *hijab*, the *abhaya*, which have drawn unwelcome attention in work places (Haniffa 2008). Reformist influence has been suggested in the growth of the donning of the *hijab* (head covering) or the *abaya* (gown) sometimes with a *niqab* (face covering). The latter is worn instead of the sari Muslim women historically (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, 13; Haniffa 2008).

Victor de Munck<sup>245</sup> (2005) similarly calls for need to be aware of these nuances of Muslim identity politics in Sri Lanka. For him these identities are enclosed between “meso- and macro-levels of national and global sociopolitical cultures and the micro level of individual lives” (2005, 402). Though as I have suggested these negotiations of Muslim identities within Sri Lanka are tied to global trends of Islamic reformism and revivalism, the politics in Muslim communities is still “local” in nature while being entwined with an “imagined” global Muslim community (de Munck 2005, 402). In Sri Lanka, then, the “national identity” of being Muslim is constructed in response to Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil Hindu and Christian identities while simultaneously the “local” identity is one that is entrenched between the Sufi and, what has been at times been represented as the “orthodox” rendition of Islam and its proponents (de Munck 2005, 402). These identities are far more complex than can be captured in simple dualisms of orthodox and Sufi or rural and urban. As de Munck argues, these three “porous” levels of identities, ones that are impacted by “global, national and local” need to be acknowledged when understanding the realities of Islamic identity formation in Sri Lanka. It is a similar conclusion that is evoked by Klem in his case study in which he asserts that one cannot reduce the current realities of Muslims and Sufism in Sri Lanka to any one dominant narrative or condition but must acknowledge the complexity of the webs that form Islamic religious identities in the troubled landscape of Sri Lanka. It is in this landscape that the roots of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship and the sites of Bawa’s first ever ministries developed.

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<sup>245</sup> Victor de Munck is an Associate Professor in the Anthropology Department of the State University of New York, New Paltz. He specializes in cognitive anthropology. He has published extensively on cognitive processes and culture, as well as on cross-cultural research. He has conducted three years of fieldwork in Sri Lanka.

## Conclusions

In this chapter I focused specifically on Islam and Sufism in Sri Lanka, especially as it developed through sacred spaces, which have been central sites of pilgrimages, though these shared spaces have not been without contestation. The latter was noted in Adam's Peak and Dafter Jailani, which also has significant religious purposes for Buddhists, who have attempted to reclaim the ownership of these spaces. At present then, this location creates an exceptionally difficult circumstance for Sufi communities and sacred spaces in Sri Lanka. They are at once garnering attention from the state and/or Buddhist extremist movements that see their existence as threatening the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist agenda, while also being criticized and at times attacked internally by their co-religionists whose understanding of a purified Islam saw their presence as heretical. But these spaces, as anthropologists and historical travellers have pointed out, have been shared spaces where Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and Muslims venerated according to their personal understandings.

Muslim identity politics in Sri Lanka has been dominated by the island's historical Sinhala-Tamil conflicts, which have undoubtedly implicated Muslims. Muslims have been perceived as "historical latecomers" and "not ancient primordial stakeholders in the future of the island" (McGilvray and Raheem 2007, viii). Muslims have not been granted an equal voice in the larger political situation in Sri Lanka, which was evident in the heights of the Eelam Wars where Muslims experienced violence and discrimination from both the state and the LTTE. Currently post-war realities showcase that to speak about Muslim presence on the island one must not only engage with the political and ethnic category of Muslims and their relationship with Sinhala and Tamil groups but one also must account for the dynamic realities of intra-Muslim negotiations that have been introduced with revivalist and reformist movements.

Sufism in Sri Lanka, as other Indian and South Indian cases have shown, is also immensely localized in nature. Anthropological studies by McGilvray (2004; 2014), de Munck (1994) and Klem (2011) show examples of how devotional traditions arose throughout regions in Sri Lanka. One region, which has lacked much attention, has been the Jaffna peninsula, where Muslims were expelled in 1990 by the LTTE. Within these broader discourses of political orientations and nation building in a post-war period and internal negotiations amongst diverse Muslim communities, there is a lacuna of Islamic, especially Sufi pieties, as embodied in everyday practices. What do Sufi practices look like in Sri Lanka? What is the relationship between Sufism and Islam and other local religious traditions in Sri Lanka? And how do practitioners negotiate their identities, if at all, amidst these broader currents? It is with the aim of exploring these questions that I turn now to Bawa and the communities he established in Sri Lanka.

## Chapter 5

### Bawa's First Institutions in Sri Lanka

#### Introduction

In this chapter and the next I trace the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship's origins in Sri Lanka to determine if similar dynamics, spaces, rituals and authority experienced in the Fellowship in North America is shared in its institutional counterpart, known as the Serendib Sufi Study Circle (SSSC). In this chapter I map Bawa's communities in Sri Lanka and the disciples and devotees who utilize these spaces across its different regions. In the end I focus mainly on his two sacred spaces in Jaffna. Throughout my fieldwork in Sri Lanka I discovered that it was his *ashram* in Jaffna and the *mazar* to Maryam called Mankumban on Velanai Island that formed the two central sites of activity for his followers. The *ashram* is situated in this chapter, while Mankumban is explored in Chapter 6. These two sacred sites form the Serendib Sufi Study Circle and parallel the institutional make-up that was situated in the first section.

This chapter and the next position the *ashram* and Mankumban (1) as they developed during the lifetime of Bawa and (2) as they continue to function at present. In describing both historical and current developments, I capture the broader network of affiliations based on the legacy of Bawa. Studies of Sufism and Islam specifically in South Asia have called attention to the inherent diversity of Sufism and its spaces in this particular region. Bawa's institutions in Sri Lanka, especially in Jaffna, were established before he migrated to Philadelphia. After the civil war and political conflicts in the region that included the mass displacement of Muslims from the north and momentary abandonment and damage of some of Bawa's sites, Bawa's institutions are thriving again in a post-war era. They also have now, as during his lifetime, become sites of pilgrimage for Bawa's disciples who wish to reconnect and reaffirm their commitment to Bawa by visiting his homeland. It is these commitments that lead to acts of

pilgrimages that I capture in this chapter and the subsequent one. I contend that this embodied diversity in Sri Lanka found in the Serendib Sufi Study Circle reorients Bawa's communities in North America. Consequently, the full breadth of Bawa's sites in northern Sri Lanka can only be appreciated in light of the larger network of affiliations of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship and the Serendib Sufi Study Circle that connects Sri Lanka to North America, pointing not only to localized embodied Sufism but globalized Sufism in transnational contexts.

### **Bawa's Life at the *Ashram* and Mankumban**

#### *Bawa in Jaffna and Mankumban*

Kataragama, located in southeastern Sri Lanka (see map in Figure 4.1 in Chapter 4), is a significant Sufi and Hindu pilgrimage site. Kataragama is associated with both the Hindu diety Murukan and Islam's perennial mystic Khidr.<sup>246</sup> Bawa was first spotted near Kataragama in Sri Lanka. Mauroof writes that a woman and her two brothers, two Hindu pilgrims Pariyari and Kumarasami who lived in Nallur in Jaffna, were the first ones to make contact with Bawa. It was during the brother's pilgrimage (on foot to Kataragama) that they encountered Bawa in the jungles:

The first time that the brothers sighted Bawa they were unable to make any kind of verbal contact with him. The second time was a year later in the same jungle. Again the communication was only visual. The third time, they were able to [approach] Bawa and talk to him. However, Bawa apparently did not speak the same language as my

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<sup>246</sup> This site was discussed in Chapter 4 as significant to Sufis and Hindus in Sri Lanka's pilgrimage routes, please see this Chapter 4's subsection *Sufism in Sri Lanka* and footnotes in this subsection for more on Kataragama.



informants: but was able to communicate that he would come to their house (Mauroof 1976, 46).

These two disciples asked Bawa to return with them to Jaffna but Bawa told them to go ahead and promised to arrive forty days later, which he did on the eleventh day of the Nallur Kovil (temple) festival for Murukan in 1944 (Mauroof 1976, 46). Mauroof explains that communication with Bawa was difficult during the early period, as he did not speak Tamil (perhaps his dialect was different), yet Bawa adjusted to Tamil during his stay in Jaffna (Mauroof 1976, 46). In a collected anthology of Bawa's discourse compiled by early disciples in Sri Lanka, which is entitled *Guru Mani (Teacher's Jewel)* (1961), Bawa is quoted as saying:

I lived for eighteen years on the slopes of the Silver Mountain in Kataragama. After that I spent twelve years in the caves near Jailani. Then I spent about eight years on the slopes of the mountain called Adam's Peak. I spent four and a half years after this in Nurwara Eliya in the cave in which Sita was presumed to have been kept in captivity by Ravanna, the King of Lanka (quoted in Narayan and Sawhney 10).

Bawa lived in Kokuvil at Pariyari's house, a village outside Jaffna, for seven years and then he stayed in another village called Kondavil and finally moved to Jaffna Town where he opened an *ashram* or his place of residence sometime in the 1950s, Korom dates it to 1952 (2012, 226). This building was a former Dutch warehouse. It was during this time many came to Bawa's *ashram* for healing from physical ailments and exorcisms but also to seek help to settle disputes (i.e., familial and land). Most of the devotees who remain in Jaffna and regularly participate in

reverence at the *ashram* are from the next generation of the same families who were originally healed by Bawa. The early companions of Bawa during this time were Tamil Hindus, for instance affiliated with Satya Sai Baba<sup>247</sup> or devoted to regional deities, such as Murukan, whose temple forms a central sacred site in Jaffna Town.

One such devotee, who was a doctor working in the Jaffna hospital but would later move to Philadelphia to be with Bawa, explained his early experiences of meeting Bawa in the 1970s in Jaffna:

[...H]e would sit at the table [...], he had a sirong, sometime bare bodied and all, you know ordinary person, old, old ordinary person. He'd sit on the bed and all the people, all poor people in that area a man or family would go and sit next to him and relay their problems. And he would talk to them, talk to them, very attentively, listen to every word ask questions. It could be something simple as so and so borrowed fifty rupees from me and haven't returned it to me. Or so and so was re-fencing the border and they've taken some part of our land, something like that. Worldly things. They would come to him about many things but he would listen very carefully, attentively and no body can disturb you at that time. And he didn't say I didn't come here to do these things, my business, my mission is different, no anything like that, a lot of love. And then at the end he would tell them, give them a solution about what to do. And I would see them and they'd turn out and come back and he'd go you are all God. He said I worship the same God you worship. You ask God and I also ask God.

And it happens. The thing that I noticed was poor or rich it doesn't matter, he treated them all

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<sup>247</sup> Satya Sai Baba movement developed around Sathyanarayana Raji who was born in 1926. In 1940 he identified himself as the reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba (d. 1918), a holy man from Maharashtra. Sai Baba's tradition has amalgamated elements of Hinduism and Islam. For more see *The Gurus in South Asia: New Interdisciplinary Perspectives* edited by Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame (2012).

the same way. And there it, you can call it love, that is full attention to them, completely dedicated to their wishes and their wants, and this was what I saw, I was a Hindu, he was supposed to be a Muslim. No difference, that was very well. And then at the end of it all, he'd tell a small story, a story, which was wisdom based. As much as to say, if you had this wisdom, you wouldn't need to come here. You would be able to solve it your own way, your own mind on your own.<sup>248</sup>

Ganesan was a follower of Sai Baba in Jaffna when he heard about Bawa from another devotee. He became interested and went to visit Bawa at his *ashram*. In Ganesan's comments above, there is clear evidence that he knew that Bawa was a Muslim, while Ganesan identified himself as a Hindu. When I met Ganesan in Philadelphia, he was praying five times a day and told me he fasted during Ramadan, signaling to his practice of Islam. The conversion to Islam by Hindus was not a common trend amongst students of Bawa, as Bawa did not tell his students to convert. As a result, in Jaffna especially, most of the devotees were Hindus in the early years of Bawa's ministry, and this trend continues today.

During this early period in Jaffna, parallels were drawn between Bawa and Murukan by his initial Hindu followers, as many felt that Bawa was an incarnation of the Hindu deity Murukan.

Lord Murugan is the Hindu counterpart of the *Qutbiyyat*, the sixth level of wisdom. Bawangal [another referent for Bawa] is the *qutb* and also the consciousness of the two is interchangeable. In fact, the people in Jaffna (Hindus) used to revere Bawangal as Lord

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<sup>248</sup> Ganesan, interview with author, Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship kitchen, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. April 23, 2014.

Murugan. Lord Murugan was said to have had two wives Theivanai and Valli and Bawangal named his two deers Theivanai and Valli (Ganesan quoted in Le Pichon et al 163).<sup>249</sup>

It was in this period that many of his devotees referred to Bawa as “swami” or “guru.” A common referent used in South Indian religious traditions to honour deities but also to denote religious figures. This practice takes place amongst Tamil Hindus in Sri Lanka, but can also be found in Christianity. It was during this early period that Ahamed Kabeer, who would be appointed as one of the two imams at the mosque when it was built in Philadelphia, first met Bawa.<sup>250</sup> Kabeer was a pearl diver from South India and came to the Mannar region of Sri Lanka to pearl dive with his uncle.<sup>251</sup> His uncle brought Kabeer to meet Bawa sometime in the 1950s. In 1962 Bawa had asked Kabeer to move into the *ashram* and started teaching him how to make *duas* (intercessory prayers) and amulets, using Arabic alphabets and numerology; a practice that formed the basis of Bawa’s own healing ministry. Bawa, now known as a healer and performer of exorcisms, started teaching Kabeer to complete similar rituals as well.<sup>252</sup>

Sometime in the early 1940s Bawa also sought out land in northern Jaffna, based on a vision and mystical relationship to Maryam. Ragavan Moorthy’s mother was one of Bawa’s early disciples. As a child, Ragavan used to travel with Bawa frequently. Ragavan, whom I interviewed in Philadelphia at the Headquarters of the Fellowship, explained that he was with Bawa when he first found the village known as Mankumpan on Velanai Island. This property

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<sup>249</sup> Bawa was also said to communicate with animals discussing matters of their previous lives when they encountered each other. These included the deer but also peacocks and dogs.

<sup>250</sup> Please see Chapter 2’s subsection on the *masjid* in the Fellowship for more on Kabeer.

<sup>251</sup> Interview with author, Bawa’s room in the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, Philadelphia, April 16, 2014.

<sup>252</sup> Kabeer’s grandfather and uncle used to perform these tasks and thus Kabeer explained to me that Bawa knew Kabeer’s ancestral lineage, hence Bawa trained Kabeer to do similar work. Interview with author, Bawa’s room in the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, Philadelphia, April 16, 2014.

was known as “God’s House,” though the name “Mankumban” was frequently used to refer to this property. Since there was no causeway between Jaffna and the islands, like there is now, they would travel between the islands on a small boat between the *ashram* and Mankumban. In 1954 Bawa began the construction of the building that was to be dedicated to Maryam, which would only be completed with the arrival of American disciples from Philadelphia to Jaffna.<sup>253</sup>

Bawa was also a farmer. He was said to have two farms according to some of my interviewees, while Mauroof in his study writes that Bawa had three farms (1976). There are different accounts of where his initial farm(s) were located. Ragavan informed me that one of Bawa’s farms was in Tripathy, South India, while other disciples mentioned that it was in eastern Sri Lanka. One of the farms was certainly in Puliyanikulam, in Vavuniya District in Sri Lanka. This farm has recently been refurbished after it was decimated during the final stages of the civil war. Members have reconstructed a home with a kitchen, restored the well that Bawa initially dug and have started farming again. Once a month, usually the first Saturday or Sunday of the month, members from the Jaffna *ashram* take the local bus to Puliyanikulam and locals near the farm also join in prayers and communal meal, similar to practices in Mankumban and the *ashram*.

His initial reason for acquiring the farm property was to feed the many visitors to his *ashram*. He used the crops from his farm to sell to the local market to acquire money for his *ashram* or he would use crops to cook purely vegetarian meals, a diet he advocated.<sup>254</sup> His abilities to cultivate land and cook formed the basis of some of his discourses and teachings,

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<sup>253</sup> For more on Mankumban please see Chapter 6 which engages specifically with this space.

<sup>254</sup> In fact much of the recipes that remain, such as *kanji* (rice soup) that is cooked during Ramadan, both in Sri Lanka and Philadelphia, are based on Bawa’s recipes, which has now been collected into recipe books that the Fellowship Press publishes. For Bawa’s recipes please see the Fellowship’s *The Tasty, Economical Cookbook Volume 1 and 2* (1983). Through his cooking Bawa taught ayurvedic philosophies and herbology based on plants and foods common in Jaffna, and he trained many of his disciples spiritually through cooking.

especially as they taught the importance of self-sustainability and environmental consciousness. However, he also used farming and cooking as metaphors for spiritual development.<sup>255</sup> This would be replicated in America with the property purchased in Coatesville, where Bawa would be eventually entombed. The original property purchased for the purposes of a cemetery, was also sectioned into a farming and gardening area, which remains today. Farming is a central activity for members of the Fellowship who reside near the *mazar*. The serving of food to all visitors was also noted both at the welcome center at the *mazar* and at the Fellowship Headquarters in Philadelphia. Farming and the distribution of food to visitors by disciples form a similar current in both localities of Bawa's communities.

Sufi lodges and centers were understood as spaces wherein Sufi *shaykhs* resided and ministered to their students.<sup>256</sup> The *ashram* (*asrama* or hermitage) of Bawa was his place of residence and ministry in Sri Lanka. In the South Asian milieu, *ashrams* have a particular historical and religious context that speaks especially to Hindu traditions. Meena Khandelwal (2012)<sup>257</sup> describes an *ashram* as

a small hermitage where a handful of renouncers live, or it can be a sprawling complex that incorporates a kitchen capable of feeding hundreds daily as well as rooms where

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<sup>255</sup>For more on Sufism and sustainable agriculture through the teachings of Bawa and the Fellowship please see Eleanor Daly Finnegan's, "Cultivating Faith: The Relationship between Islam and Sustainable Agriculture in Rural Communities of American Muslims," in *Global Food Insecurity: Rethinking Agricultural and Rural Development Paradigm and Policy*, edited by Mohamed Behnassi, Sidney Draggan, and Sanni Yaya (Netherlands: Springer, 2011, 53-62) or her dissertation work, *Hijra and Homegrown Agriculture: Farming among American Muslim Communities* (2011).

<sup>256</sup>For a discussion of Sufi lodges and centers please see Chapter 2's subsection *Sufi Centers of Activities and Shrine Cultures*.

<sup>257</sup>Meena Khandelwal is an Associate Professor in the Anthropology Department at the University of Iowa. Her area of interests are in India and South Asia where she explores transnational feminism, feminist anthropology, migration, Indian diaspora, development, Hindu renunciation, gender and sexuality. She has published extensively on Hindu religious renunciation such as *Women in Ochre Robes: Gendering Hindu Renunciation* (2004).

pilgrims and other laypersons can stay for short periods. Depending on its size and sectarian orientation, an ashram may have a temple or altar for performing fire sacrifice (*yajna*) or a meditation hall. It may be run by a national or transnational religious organization with clear ecclesiastical structure or may have as its head a charismatic guru who serves as spiritual and institutional authority. Ashrams are considered to be religious rather than touristic institutions, but in practice this distinction has become blurred as ashrams are incorporated into the tourist industry (206).

Similar to Sufi centers, *ashrams* vary in size and activity, but they include kitchens to serve those in need, while *ashrams* also provide hospitality to travellers and visitors. Additionally, altars and temples with fire sacrifice may be another section of the *ashram*, along with a meditation hall. The critical component of an *ashram* is a “charismatic guru” or deity who is at its center.

Mauroof (1976) writes that when he encountered the *ashram* during his time in Jaffna, written on the wall were the following “statements”:

1. the non-sectarian attitude toward religion and gods;
2. the rules of conduct at the *ashram* specifying that the matron of the *ashram* was the final authority in regard to conduct;
3. the procedures for conduct when the guru was not present. Patients and students were to sit silently and make their requests within their selves [sic]. They were promised that by the performance of such conduct they will understand the true power of the institution in regard to the resolution of problems; and

4. that no one should relate the incidents that they see happening in the ashram to outsiders (48).

The *ashram* was already a space wherein identification with a specific religious tradition was being avoided, while it was the guru (i.e., Bawa) who maintained authority. In Bawa's absence it was the "matron" appointed by Bawa who had secondary authority, which still remains today. The latter points to the reality that the inclusiveness of Bawa's ministry was established well before his arrival to Philadelphia, while females also held leadership positions. Still, practices I noted at the Fellowship Headquarters were also central to Bawa's early ministry in Jaffna, especially ones that contained affinity with Islam.

#### *The Ashram and its Sub-Spaces: Bawa's First Institution*



Figure 5.1: Bawa's bed, which is maintained as a shrine in his *ashram* in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. Oil-laps and incense sticks ornate Bawa's bed, which is the site of devotion. Photograph taken by the author, July 2013.



The first floor's main hall of the *ashram* serves as the central hall in which daily prayers and communal devotions and food are shared. The main space in the *ashram* is the open meditation hall that people visit and offer *duas* (prayers). They especially venerate Bawa's bed that sits at its center. For Hindu devotees, this often involves the lighting of incense sticks and circumambulating Bawa's bed with the incense sticks, while venerating his photographs behind the bed (i.e., kissing it or touching it) and wiping their face or placing their hand over their heart. Eventually devotees stand at the end of the bed and pray with their hands with palms open, held up to their chest. In the Fellowship Headquarters in Philadelphia, Bawa's bed similarly is the



Figure 5.2: Room on the main floor that is akin to an ancillary shrine for Bawa. This room, unlike other rooms set up as shrines for Bawa, does not contain his personal items. But ritual activity, such as breaking fast during Ramadan, takes place in this room. The “altar” centered on a painting of Bawa contains a lit oil lamp, a cup with water and a water sprinkler. Taken by author in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, July 2013.

focus of personal devotion.<sup>258</sup> The acts of devotion noted at the *ashram* are distinctively different in that they garner much more attention and veneration, especially in relation to spaces such as Colombo and Philadelphia.

The main floor of the *ashram* opens into a courtyard that contains large coconut, mango and lime trees, along with two bathrooms. One bathroom is western style with a flushing toilet built for the American disciples and the other is a squat toilet. This veranda area also contains two small fire-kitchens, where the cooking takes place for large events. To the left is one of the two kitchen areas of the *ashram*. On top of the kitchen door in faded font is “786” (the numerical value for *bismillah* or “In the name of Allah, the compassionate and merciful”). On the left of the kitchen door on the wall is a framed picture (from one of the Fellowship calendars printed in Philadelphia) of Bawa cooking over a large cauldron.

The main water source for the *ashram* is from a well near the second kitchen at the back of the *ashram*. I was told that this water was especially pure. The same sentiments about water were shared with me in Philadelphia, especially at the *mazar*, where I noted similar remarks about the water that Bawa specifically constructed.<sup>259</sup> Spaces that Bawa instituted all contain some water source. They include a pump system as seen in Philadelphia both at the Fellowship Headquarters or the *mazar* in Coatesville or a well found in the *ashram* and Mankumban. Bawa’s teachings of the significance of water are many, but they form a consistent source at all his sacred spaces.<sup>260</sup> The small-statured senior disciple and female custodian of the *ashram*, or the

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<sup>258</sup> It is interesting to note that it is Bawa’s bed that is the center of ritual and personal devotion, the significance of a bed and its insinuations need further exploration, which I am unable to complete in this particular study.

<sup>259</sup> Please see Chapter 3 subsection *At the Grave of their Shaykh: the Fellowship’s Mazar*.

<sup>260</sup> Chapter 9’s subsection *The Pond* explores another metaphor of the water utilized by Bawa.

matron,<sup>261</sup> expressed to me that in all the cooking that she does at the *ashram*, they only use water from the well. The matron explained that Bawa dug the well himself, and it never has run empty. I speak about the matron further below, but she told me that the well from Mankumban, the *ashram* and the well in Philadelphia by the *mazar* all built by Bawa are connected to the well of Zamzam in Mecca- and that is what made the water special and significant.<sup>262</sup> Nur Sharon Marcus, whom I interviewed in Toronto, shared this similar sentiment about the water.<sup>263</sup> Nur Sharon Marcus was amazed and shocked that the well water at Mankumban was used for washing and ablutions, instead of being used for curative purposes. This well and its significance, is another trend noted from Philadelphia to Jaffna.

On the main floor, there is also a smaller sanctuary for Bawa behind the stairs, as seen in Figure 5.2. According to some devotees this room is one of the more significant sacred spaces in the overall *ashram*. During Ramadan, fast is broken in this room. The cauldron in which *kanji* (rice soup) that is traditionally cooked throughout Ramadan is offered to Bawa before it is distributed to everyone in attendance also in this room. This prayer room has a large painting of Bawa along with an altar with incense stick and a *kuthu-velaku*, or an oil lamp.<sup>264</sup> There were

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<sup>261</sup> I refer to the female custodian of the *ashram* as the “matron” throughout my study. When I asked her about using her name, she was apprehensive and told me that the focus of my study should be Bawa and not her. So to respect her wishes, I use “matron” as her referent. Her position as a female authority, which is discussed further in Chapter 8, garners difficult attention amongst other members of the Serendib Sufi Study Circle as no one maintains the same position as she does.

<sup>262</sup> During another one of my visits during Ramadan, one of the regular members of the *ashram* was opening a package from a disciple from Saudi Arabia, which contained fresh dates, and bottles of water from Zamzam. They were trying to sort out how to divide the water for *iftar* and dates between the *ashram* and Mankumban, as matron quietly told them, while sitting beside me, “why do you need that water when you have the Zamzam water in the well?” They looked at each other and smiled but pleasantly retorted that since “the devotee sent it to Bawa, it is our obligation to distribute it.” For the breaking of Ramadan fast at the *ashram*, it was the well water that was used to break the fast along with dates.

<sup>263</sup> For this interview, please see Chapter 3’s subsection *At the Grave of their Shaykh: the Fellowship’s Mazar*.

<sup>264</sup> Oil lamps are commonly found in Hindu temples and Catholic churches and so is not necessarily only a Hindu marker, but more emblematic of a regional cultural tradition.

also photographs of Bawa on the wall (three) along with a banner of Bawa superimposed in front of a green-glittered gold mosque.<sup>265</sup>

The *ashram* consists of two floors. The top floor contains two large rooms with beds that belonged to Bawa. They also include his personal items, such as shoes and walking sticks. These rooms of Bawa and their subsequent memorialization are common both in Philadelphia and in Sri Lanka (i.e., at the branches in Colombo, Matale and Jaffna). The second floor's hallway walls also contain photographs of Bawa and his disciples from Philadelphia who visited Bawa in Sri Lanka. The room on the left side had a painting of Abdul Qadir Jilani above the door, which the



Figure 5.3: A pilgrim is looking at the photographs on the wall on the second floor of the *ashram*. These photographs include pictures of Bawa, a photograph of Bawa's *mazar* in Coatesville, Pennsylvania and a painting of Abdul Qadir Jilani above the door. Photograph by author, August 2013.

<sup>265</sup> Tamil disciples told me that when the *ashram* was taken over by both the LTTE and the army, it was reported that they saw snakes in this particular room. Because of these snakes both the LTTE and army, who tried to occupy the *ashram* at different intervals abandoned their attempts.

matron explained was brought from the United States to Jaffna. Most pictures, published discourses, hanging banners in Arabic with either the *bismillah*, the ninety-nine names of Allah were from Philadelphia, Figure 5.3.

Inside the second room was another bed on which Bawa slept along with his walking stick at the foot of the bed. This is the infamous stick that Bawa used for curing purposes i.e., using it to physically strike illness or spirits from devotees who came to visit. The bed again was green like all the other beddings and had a *tasbeih* (prayer beads) hanging on one of the poles, along with a yellow toque and two small footstools with Bawa's brown shoes. All the beds have prayer rug in front and silver cup with water. On the opposite side of the bed is a side table with



Figure 5.4: Facing Bawa's bed, in a room on the second floor, this talisman utilizes sacred geometry, numerology and Arabic alphabets, along with names of angels and verses from the Qur'an for protective purposes. Bawa completed it. Photograph by author, July 2013.

a framed *ta'widh*, similar to the purpose an amulet serves as a talisman as seen in Figure 5.4. This includes Qur'anic verses or numerical symbolic formula for protection in the place that it is hung. I was told that Bawa completed this. Protective talismans are hung around the *ashram*, especially one above the door of the main entrance to the *ashram*. This room also has a window that faces into the lagoon that is across the *ashram* and the door leading out to the hallway also has a balcony facing the lagoon. The North American members of the Fellowship who visited with Bawa during his return trips back to Sri Lanka from Philadelphia completed this entire second floor.

#### *The Early Mawlid at the Ashram*

In Jaffna, Mauroof writes that Bawa held *mawlid*s for *Qutb* Muhaiyaddeen (Jilani) at the *ashram* as early as 1962.<sup>266</sup> Singers and reciters would be invited for the feast, along with hundreds who came to the *ashram*, after which meals and gifts (i.e., fruits or coins) were handed out by devotees of Bawa, and sometimes even by Bawa himself (1976, 51). This feast took place annually and was held the same weekend as the yearly general meeting of Bawa's devotees. The annual general meeting took place in the town hall in Jaffna. Locals from Jaffna and across the island visited to hear prominent speakers. Some of Bawa's followers attended either or both celebrations (Mauroof 1976, 51). Notable here is the concurrent maintenance of rituals of *mawlid*s and the discoursing of Bawa, as parallel forms of activities developing early in Bawa's Jaffna ministries, a trend found in Philadelphia.

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<sup>266</sup> The correlations between Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, Abdul Qadir Jilani and the title of *Qutb* is further explored in Chapter 7's subsection on Bawa as *Qutb*, please see this chapter for more on this topic.

Mauroof indicates in his study, this festival which he experienced in August 1967, 1968 and 1970 attracted visitors and friends of Bawa from all over the island (1976, 48). Mauroof writes:

The event was announced in the town of Nallur [in Jaffna] and a great many people from that community also participated in the feast. The *ashram* was painted and decorated for the event. The formal proceedings would start about 5:00pm. At that time about a dozen persons could recite the *mowlood*- the Arabic songs are sung during these occasions- would start there singing. This went on for about three hours. The crowds of people would be seated around, respectfully listening to the chants. Bawa did not participate in the singing. He would sit still, almost trance-like, and his body, especially his face seemed to undergo unique transformation. The face would be perfectly still and a glow seemed to emanate from it. Those among the crowd who did not participate in the singing, as performers or as listeners, would be seated facing Bawa basking in the flow of his communion. It is important to note that the singers, although they were singing verses in praise of Kutb Muhaiyaddeen, and although they might identify Bawa seated with them as the original Bawa or Kutb Muhaiyaddeen, did not seem to address their chants to the figure seated across them. Singing the Muhaiyaddeen mowlood was a religious act for them which they would have performed in many a household during that month. They were now performing it in Bawa's household (1976, 49).

Several important details emerge from Mauroof's early documentation of the *mawlid* celebrations at the *ashram*. First, the *mawlid* celebrations held at the *ashram* are similar to the

practice of many Muslims across the island that also host *mawlid* celebrations in their homes. Additionally, Bawa himself did not lead the recitation of the *mawlid*. He was a host and participant in the event, while singers and reciters were invited to lead the celebrations. This is a detail that was noted in Philadelphia as well, where Bawa did not lead the recitations in Arabic. Similarly to the early days in Jaffna, in Philadelphia I also depicted the diverse members who participated in the *mawlid*. These included disciples of Bawa to new Muslims not affiliated with the Fellowship as formal members. Still, there seems to be sense that many who attended the *mawlid* recitations, especially for *qutb* Muhaiyaddeen (Jilani) understood that “trance-like state” of Bawa who sat in front of them, was in some capacity the *Qutb* Muhaiyaddeen (Mauroof 1976, 50). It is this fluid interpretation of who Bawa is that creates challenges for the diverse individuals who participate in such rituals.

In Jaffna, it appears, that Bawa started the *mawlid* recitations in accordance with a tradition maintained by Sufi Muslims in Sri Lanka, especially Qadiri Sufism. Hindu disciples and devotees of Bawa generally participated in the *mawlid*s at his *ashram*, because of their devotion to Bawa. This practice travelled with Bawa to Philadelphia and was further instituted as a core ritual within the Fellowship. Now American disciples of Bawa host the *mawlid*, and welcome predominantly American Muslim immigrants, who understand the *mawlid* as a significant part of Islamic ritual. This captures a full spectrum of the development of the *mawlid*s for Bawa and his communities.

After the recitation, Bawa discoursed and then a vegetarian meal was served to all those in attendance. In Philadelphia, Bawa also provided a discourse during the *mawlid* recitations. To



maintain this practice, currently after *mawlid* recitations, readings are selected from Bawa's discourses and read out as part of the *mawlid*.<sup>267</sup> Mauroof writes:

The people sat on the floor. Plantain leaves were spread in front of them. The food would be brought to each person, the servers going around the *ashram* serving one line after the other. Bawa himself would make the serving for those who found seats on the first round (1976, 50). After eating Bawa would distribute little gifts to everyone. These gifts usually consist of money in small coins, which had previously been wrapped in colour paper. Sometimes fruits and flowers also served as gifts. The flowers, the fruits, the money, the food, its preparation and all of the arrangements connected with the feast were provided by devotees as voluntary gifts for Bawa and the occasion (1976, 51).

The *mawlid* event coincided with Bawa lecturing to the broader public in the town hall, a public and secular space outside his own *ashram*, which attracted the diverse crowd of Jaffna. Those who attended this portion of the event were also from different religious backgrounds:

It must be noted here that neither these donors nor the persons who participated in the other ways in the feast were all Muslims: very many of them, in fact the majority, would be identified themselves, as well by others, as Hindu. There were also Christians and Buddhists in the congregation. Since the Muhaiyaddeen Feast was an annual event, it was arranged to fall in the same weekend as the annual general meeting of Bawa followers in Northern Sri Lanka. This meeting was held the next day, or the day after in the Town-

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<sup>267</sup> Please see Chapter 2's discussion of *Mawlids* at the Fellowship, for more.

Hall. The meeting was addressed by several local “important” persons, by some “important” persons from out-of-town, and by Bawa. These meeting and the feast were attended by between 200 and 300 persons. Some persons attended the feast and the meeting; others, only one of them (Mauroof 1976, 51).

It is the diversity of the people that attended events hosted by Bawa that can be noted in these early accounts by Mauroof. It appears that the *mawlid* celebration was purposefully synchronized to fall in place with the annual general meeting that Bawa held for his followers publicly. One that branched out into the community and attracted followers from across the island that came to partake and even give talks. Bawa’s hosting of this larger event serviced many people. Similarly to the Fellowship Headquarters in Philadelphia, according to the descriptions provided by Mauroof, the development of the *ashram* in Jaffna attracted many people from diverse religious backgrounds. This was noted both at the Headquarters of Bawa’s Fellowship but also at the *mazar* in Coatesville, suggesting that the diversity distinguished at the Fellowship is in fact inherent to the root of this community found in Jaffna amongst Bawa’s earliest institutions. These tendencies are further confirmed as one continues to explore contemporary manifestations of rituals and pieties at spaces ascribed to Bawa. The festivals commemorated by Bawa include *mawlid*s, an Islamic festival that continues to be celebrated in Bawa’s Sri Lankan sites, but it did not mean that those in attendance were solely Muslims alone. These celebratory events that commemorated for a Muslim saint, also served food to all those who attended and included an event hosted by Bawa, who also provided his own discourses to those in attendance. The multiple significances of a singular event or ritual seem to be a reality not only in Philadelphia,

but also early on in Bawa's ministry in Jaffna. Bawa's fame would eventually spread beyond the northern province of Jaffna, into other parts of Sri Lanka.

*Jaffna to Colombo and the Formation of the Serendib Sufi Study Circle (SSSC)*

From Jaffna, Bawa's fame began to spread and became known to a prominent Muslim family in Colombo by the name of the Macan-Markars. Ameen, the wife of Ajwad Macan-Markar, explains that it was thirty-five years after her father-in-law had encountered Bawa that they went in search of a healer. When their own child was having difficulties, they sought out a "great saint or holy person in Jaffna" and invited him to Colombo to the house of Araby Macan-Markar (Gnaniar), the sister-in-law of Ameen, suggesting that Bawa was known to Ajwad's father even before Ajwad himself met him:

My husband, Dr. Ajwad-Macan-Markar, and I met Bawangal [honorific for Bawa] in 1962 at one of these meetings at Gnaniar's (my other sister-in-law) house in Colombo. After hearing Bawangal speak several times there, we spent ten days in the *ashram* in Jaffna with him. When we visited Bawangal in Jaffna, between 1962-1971 [...], we and our five children and others from Colombo, as well as Fuard's family from Wattala, would travel to Jaffna in one carriage (train) full of people every year to attend the *maulids* [*mawlid*s]. If Bawangal was in Colombo at that time, he too, would be in the carriage with everyone else, making the journey to Jaffna. When the *maulids* ended, everyone would proceed to Mankumban bringing pots and pans and cooking supplies from Jaffna in a van that they had rented [...]. Whether in Mankumban or Jaffna, Bawangal would talk, cook and serve food each day (quoted in Le Pichon et al 2010, 8).

Ameen notes in her early recollection of Bawa that it is the central celebration of the *mawlid*, especially at the *ashram* and Mankumban that formed the activity around Bawa. The *ashram* and Mankumban served as the chief sites for the enactment of these rituals.

The Macan-Markars eventually requested that Bawa stay with them in Colombo. Bawa declined yet they continually insisted and Bawa finally agreed. Though he spent most of his time in Jaffna at his *ashram*, in Colombo, the home of Dr. Macan-Markar formed the main center that came to be known as the Serendib Sufi Study Circle (SSSC) in 1963. It was the members of the Colombo branch of Bawa's followers that organized and formed a legal institution around Bawa. As such, Bawa's Jaffna institutions also fell under this legal incorporation. Importantly though, it is the first time that Bawa and his followers formalized as an organization. This organization's structure is very similar to the Fellowship in Philadelphia. It is Bawa who is listed as the "patron" and subsequent committees and trustees were founded to help run the institution, through meetings and voting privileges.<sup>268</sup> The incorporation of the SSSC is one of the final stages of the formal establishment of Bawa's community in Sri Lanka, as the *ashram* and Mankumban fell under the SSSC constitution. The Sri Lankan government officially recognized the group on November 27, 1974.

Fuad Uduman<sup>269</sup> was another devoted follower, who Ameen mentions in her recollection above, who came seeking a holy man in Jaffna from Colombo in the late 1950s. He was a successful businessman who started one of the first security companies in Sri Lanka. When he arrived in Jaffna to begin the search for the holy man whom he had heard about, he found a disciple of Bawa waiting for him in the hotel lobby. This disciple was sent by Bawa to bring

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<sup>268</sup> The details of this charter are further explored in Chapter 9's subsection on the SSSC's Charter.

<sup>269</sup> Fuad Uduman, a Sri Lankan Muslim, was another disciple of Bawa from Colombo, who went seeking Bawa in Jaffna. His home in Wattala remained another place for gatherings. Uduman and his family eventually came to Philadelphia to be with Bawa and for safety. Some of Fuad's family also left after the riots of 1983.

Fuard to meet Bawa at the *ashram*. This meeting with Bawa formed another central relationship and Uduman's house in Wattala, Colombo, was an alternative base where Bawa also held *mawlid* celebrations and discourses.

During this time Bawa travelled with the Macan-Markar family to Perendiya, where Dr. Macan-Marker was posted at the University of Perendiya as a Lecturer, which is located in Kandy.<sup>270</sup> Despite travelling across Sri Lanka, it was the Macan-Marker home which remained one of the principal meeting houses for Bawa in Colombo and which would later serve as the home stay for Americans who visited in the 1970s and 1980s with Bawa. To this present time this home serves as the headquarters of the Serendib Sufi Study Circle (SSSC). The main focus of the former room of Bawa is his bed, which similar to Bawa's room in Philadelphia and in Jaffna is memorialized and serves as an ancillary shrine (Figure 5.5). Like Philadelphia, it is Bawa's bed that forms the orientation of the room. His bed is presented simply with no ritual accouterments (i.e., oil-lamps), which differs from the *ashram* in Jaffna.

In Colombo, then, the focus was not on the performance of exorcisms and healing as was the case in Jaffna, but rather the mostly wealthy and socially well-situated Muslim followers of Bawa were orientated towards his teachings and its dissemination through publications. The emphasis on the teachings of Bawa and the publication of his teachings that began in Colombo continued to be one of the enduring legacies of Bawa's Fellowship in Philadelphia.<sup>271</sup> Colombo no longer publishes books or volumes as it did in the early years; this is likely due to the aging or passing away of most of the senior disciples of Bawa in Colombo who completed this work. In Colombo the members also focused on serving and helping those who were less fortunate and

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<sup>270</sup> Please see Figure 4.1 map of Sri Lanka in Chapter 4.

<sup>271</sup> In Chapter 2's discussion of the Fellowship, I highlighted that the publishing of discourses by Bawa plays a formative objective of the Fellowship.

poor. Some forms of healing did take place in Colombo, like Jaffna, though the focus was on Bawa's teachings along with the commemoration of *mawlid*s, a practice that began in Jaffna and continued throughout Bawa's spaces in Sri Lanka.

#### *Dhikr and Personal Piety at the Colombo Headquarters*

The main floor of the Serendib Sufi Study Circle, the home of Dr. Macan-Markar (an initial follower and disciple of Bawa) is a large open hallway with a dining area and a living room. It contains photographs of the Macan-Markar family and their grandchildren throughout the house, along with family photographs with Bawa. On the second floor, is a kitchen area at the top of the stairs in addition to more family photographs of the Macan-Marker, his wife (Ameen), their siblings and their own children, along with pictures of the members of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen



Figure 5.5: Bawa's bed in Serendib Sufi Study Circle (SSSC) in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Similar to Philadelphia, Bawa's personal items are memorialized in Colombo and Jaffna, at his *ashram*. They are the center of devotional activities and personal acts of piety. Photograph taken by author, July 2013.

Fellowship in Philadelphia.

In the small hallway, on the left side was a drawer with various photographs of Bawa, with sayings and his teachings beneath the photograph. One is of Bawa mediating, another with a small child who is staring into his eyes and one photograph of Bawa's *mazar* in Coatesville and a two-framed photograph of the *masjid* and *khutba* seat in Philadelphia. Throughout my fieldwork I found similar photographs in Jaffna at Bawa's *ashram* and in Philadelphia. I have noticed that it is photographs of places associated with Bawa that are present in all his spaces that form the tangible connections between these spaces. For a community without a living *shaykh*, these memorabilia of Bawa that extend to his paintings and personal items (i.e., bed, shoes etc.) are palpable reminders of a spiritual teacher they encountered and also signals to Bawa's presence in different ways. These photographs also capture distinctive representations of Bawa as a painter, healer, father, cook and spiritual leader. Photos of Bawa, as photographs of holy figures in Hinduism and in Sufism, are viewed as sources of blessings (*baraka*) or *darshan* (blessed sight).

On the second floor Bawa's room is the site of veneration. This was the room that Bawa stayed in when he visited Colombo. Like other places the focus in this room was Bawa's former bed, which was covered in green *chaddor* (cloth), with gold embroidery and *Allah* written in Arabic across it as seen in Figure 5.5. At the foot of the bed in a glass case were Bawa's worn-out brown leather shoes. On top of the pillow in a clear plastic bag was his yellow toque. Devotees venerate these personal items of Bawa as a means to access his continual grace. As Frank Korom (2012) has suggested, "through the ongoing interaction with a range of representational objects, a class of which might be termed relic (*athar*), a community of like-minded individuals can maintain intimate contact with their guide decades after his exit from the mundane realm of existence" (2). It is these objects that belonged to Bawa that maintain his

presence; especially as he physically no longer exist. Thus, the bed is the center of all ritual activity in the room.<sup>272</sup>

Weekly meetings take place at the SSSC on Sunday mornings at 10:30am outside this room, similar to the meetings that take place in Philadelphia and at the branches of the Fellowship (i.e., in Toronto and Boston). During my first visit to the SSSC, I participated in the Sunday meeting, which included four males and three females (myself included):

The President of the SSSC led the opening prayers, along with a *kalimah* (word) and we also sang the *salawat* to the Prophet Muhammad. The President concluded with his own prayers in English, asking Allah and Bawa to guide those present. After individuals performed their personal acts of devotion (i.e., kissed the bed) we all returned to the seating area outside the room and one of the male devotees played Bawa's discourse on a cassette player.

In Philadelphia for Sunday morning discourse meetings, the focus is solely on the listening to Bawa's discourses and sharing and discussing insights from them, though individual members may go to Bawa's room to mediate or venerate his bed, this is not done communally at any point as found in Colombo. This is a distinct difference in Sri Lanka, where veneration of Bawa's bed is a central part of the ritual activity. This particular practice, with noted differences in movements and gestures, remains central in both Colombo and Jaffna.

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<sup>272</sup> There is also a rocking chair at the foot of the bed, along with a nightstand with flowers and prayer books in Tamil on the opposite side of the bed and bookshelves with Bawa's books.



In addition to the once a week meetings, once a month, usually on the last Sunday of the month in the afternoon (around 3pm), there is also a communal *dhikr* recitation that is held at the SSSC in Colombo. The main floor is usually reorganized to accommodate a large group of participants. Mats are laid across the floor, and cover the entire living room and dinning room space. Men sit in the living room area. No one formally sits in the front or center of the room, except that everyone was turned towards a cassette player from where Bawa's voice is heard. It is Bawa's recitation of *dhikr* that is played on an audiocassette; in effect it is Bawa that leads *dhikr*. Women sat in the dinning room area behind the men. There were chairs that were pulled aside for some of the older women to sit on. Many of the women held small children in their



Figure 5.6: Taken as devotees are arriving for *dhikr* at the Serendib Sufi Study Circle (SSSC) in Colombo. The perspective is taken from the women's section, where I am sitting. Bags of rice can also be noted near the door, which will be distributed after *dhikr*. Photograph taken by author, August 2013.

laps- some wearing bright floral *saris*; other women were wearing long black gowns (*abayas*) and the *hijab*. The men also dressed in formal and Islamic dress. Everyone men, women and young girls (except male children) covered their hair. This is captured in Figure 5.6.

The *dhikr* begins with a recitation of prayers read out from a worn out Arabic prayer book, which was distributed to all those present. The *dhikr* that I attended in August 2013 had in attendance nearly fifty people in the main hall. A few also participated by remaining in Bawa's room upstairs. This was the first *dhikr* that took place after Ramadan. The *dhikr* was similar to the *dhikr* that the members in Toronto and Philadelphia practice, with some minor differences in the names of Allah that were invoked, for instance *ya latif* (Subtle) is recited in Philadelphia and Toronto and was not recited during this particular *dhikr*.

In Colombo, aside from the weekly discourse meetings held on Sunday mornings, *dhikr* was the only other gathering that was held once a month. *Dhikr*, as I highlighted in the Fellowship (Chapter 2) and the *mazar* (Chapter 3), formed a central daily ritual in Philadelphia amongst Bawa's disciples and was adopted by his disciples at its earliest stages in the community's formation, even by those who did not identify with Islam or practice *salat*.<sup>273</sup> It remains an essential institutional and personal practice for the members of the North American communities of Bawa and it forms a personal practice among some Hindus in Jaffna as well.<sup>274</sup> This extends even into the branches, such as the Toronto Branch, which keeps weekly *dhikr* gatherings (i.e., Friday nights). *Dhikr* as communal recitation was not kept in Jaffna (with the exception of Colombo once a month) as it is in North America. Across Bawa's diverse communities, it was the one practice that Bawa's disciples asserted was central to their understanding of Bawa and Sufism. This practice of *dhikr* from Philadelphia to Colombo is

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<sup>273</sup> For more on *dhikr* please see Chapter 7's subsection on *Muhaiyaddeen: the Quth*.

<sup>274</sup> This is further highlighted in this Chapter's discussion of the *Ashram* below.

another example of a common thread that links Bawa's communities transnationally. Its exploration needs more attention in future research, but in our case study it begins to bring to light how practices and teachings of one teacher, Bawa, develop in his shared spaces amongst his diverse followers.

After the full cassette of the *dhikr* was completed (both sides of the tape) the men gave *salaams* to each other and the women gave *salaams* to each other.<sup>275</sup> Some members donated food, which was distributed. It consisted of cooked rice bags with onion sauté along with a bag of plain cooked rice and another small bag with savoury appetizers (*shorteats*) and rice were also handed out. Most people were desperately trying to get food packs and those who were distributing them were also double-checking to make sure that people were not taking two, as there was not enough to go around. Larger bags were also distributed to take home and these contained dry food rations, such as rice and lentils.

When I was speaking to Awatif, who is the Secretary of the SSSC, she explained that most of those gathered for *dhikr* were those displaced by the LTTE in the 1990s from Jaffna. Others in attendance were extended family relations and members of the SSSC institutional leaders, such as the Macan-Markars. Of the former group, they ended up in refugee camps in Puttulam and whereas other displaced Muslims made their way to Colombo to resettle. The government recently encouraged them to resettle in Jaffna again, but after over twenty years of displacement, many found it difficult to re-locate again to the north, especially as their land deeds were stripped from them by the LTTE.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> *Salaams*, or the greeting of exchanging peace, consisted of holding each other's hands in the middle between the two people and repeating *salaams* and taking the *baraka* (graces or blessings) to the face with fingers.

<sup>276</sup> For more on this see discussion of the displacement of the Muslims from Jaffna please see Chapter 4's subsection on *Sufism in Sri Lanka*.

When I spoke to one of the woman who was sitting waiting for *dhikr*, she explained that she took a three-hour bus ride to Colombo and stayed with a family relative and after the meeting today, she would return to Puttalam again taking the same three-hour local bus. Awatif explained that the SSSC gives donations to them, especially in the form of food rations during special holy days. Sometimes, they also visit families in Puttalam to provide aid. A comparable contingency such as this is not found in North America, though new immigrants, some from troubled regions such as Syria, find their way to the Fellowship seeking community and emotional and social support. The Philadelphia Fellowship also maintains local outreach, such as their letter writing campaigns to prisoners. Thus, both in North America and Sri Lanka there is a social purpose in the institutions of the Fellowship and the Serendib Sufi Study Circle. They assist both immediate disciples of Bawa and newcomers in providing financial aid or services of food donations. In Colombo, there was also a predominantly Muslim presence of attendees. Again this is historically connected to the early Muslim followers of Bawa in Colombo, which is now supplemented by the presence of displaced Muslims from Jaffna who come from Puttalam. One final site is in need of mention but this one sits atop the mountainous regions of central Sri Lanka.

#### *A Jungle Shrine: The Branch in Matale*

The final space that developed in association with the Serendib Sufi Study Circle (SSSC) but almost independently of the Jaffna and Colombo is located in Matale. This branch is situated in the mountainous regions near Kandy in central Sri Lanka and attracts a different demographic of followers altogether, reflecting the regional developments in ethnicity, Islam and Sufism in Sri

Lanka. This particular group includes mainly Muslims, especially Malay Muslims.<sup>277</sup> The Matala branch group developed based on the discipleship between Customs Rahaman Thambi (younger brother) or T. K. B Rahaman (d. 2004) and Bawa, who is captured in Figure 5.7. He received his



Figure 5.7: Photograph of T. K. B. Rahaman or Customs Rahaman Thambi found in the Matala Branch of the SSSC, in central Sri Lanka. He was the leader of the Matala Branch, and his family now tends to the shrine that he constructed. The plaque reads “A Human Child of M. R. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen (RAL).” He died in 2004. Photograph taken by author, August 2013.

<sup>277</sup> Sri Lankan Malays are descendents of soldiers, political prisoners and slaves that were brought over by the Dutch and British during their colonial rule between the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries (Ansaldò 2011, 365). Ansaldò has highlighted how the label Malay is really a “misnomer” as the British used it as an umbrella term to label people from Java and the islands of Indonesia. The Malay diaspora in Sri Lanka consist about 50 000 people (Ansaldò 2011, 369). Malay Muslims maintain strong numbers in Sinhala regions, such as in the Kandy where Matala is located. Malay communities can also be found in rural areas such as Hambantota district and villages of Kirinda and Bolana. Malay majority regions also exist in predominately Tamil areas as well. For an interesting analysis of the transformation of linguistic features of Malay to Sri Lankan Malay and Sri Lankan Muslim Tamil please see “Dravidian features in the Sri Lankan Malay verb” by Peter Slomanson (2011). In the same edited volume, Umberto Ansaldò explores the bilingual mixing of Malay with other languages in Sri Lanka in “Sri Lanka Malay and its Lankan adstrates” (2011). Malay Muslims remain another example of the heterogeneity of Islamic heritages found in Sri Lanka.

nickname from Bawa because he worked as a customs officer at the airport. Rahaman was a spiritual leader in his own right, and wrote on Bawa's teachings, especially in the form of pamphlets and newsletters that he distributed at Matale and for those interested. In one such pamphlet entitled, "In Loving Memory of Our Beloved Shaikh Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeem May Allah be pleased with him" (1990), he writes:

You and I have been blessed to be in the presence of our late Sufi Sheikh during his life time for many decades, will undoubtedly bear testimony that he fulfilled for those in his presence a triple role, i.e. as Teacher, as Prophetic Preacher, and a Pastor (Healer). Through his discourses which he so eloquently delivered, he prophetically preached with



Figure 5.8: The Matale branch, which is located in central Kandy, sits amidst the jungle, as can be seen in this photograph. This photograph only captures the small *khalwa* (retreat) room, which is one part of the shrine. The shrine consists of a large flagpole, a library, lodges, American style bathrooms and meditation hall. Photograph taken by the author, August 2013.



fervor, conviction and authority. In personal situation he ministered to the needs of the individuals in a pastoral way (1990, no pagination).

Rahaman and his family, mainly his siblings, are the shrine keepers in Matale. This space, like the branch in Colombo, developed in the home of Rahaman. There is a room with Bawa's bed and personal items memorialized and are the focus of central devotion. According to his siblings, two sisters and a brother whom I spoke to during my visit to their home and the shrine in August 2013, they explained that Rahaman was a spiritual leader in the immediate community, though he himself was a student of Bawa. Rahaman received visitors, who came to him seeking aid in spiritual matters. The space that he constructed is a multidimensional shrine-retreat complex behind his home, in the jungle.

This complex is large and elaborately designed. It sits in a jungle area with flags and oil lamps dedicated to Bawa. All of which is centered on a small square room or *chilla*, for retreat



Figure 5.9: The library for Bawa Muhaiyaddeen maintained in the Matale Branch as part of the jungle shrine complex of Rahaman and his family. The library contains mainly the personal collection of Rahaman, since his passing, the items have not been organized and has not been in used. Photograph taken by the author, August 2013.

(*khalwa*). Rahaman spent most of his time spiritually “communicating” with Bawa, according to what his siblings relayed to me during my visit. The space also includes a library and study room (Figure 5.9), with Bawa’s discourses and the personal book collection of Rahaman himself. There is also a large outdoor pavilion, which is used as a prayer hall. This shrine in the jungle is now taken care by his siblings and their family and it serves a vibrant Muslim population, which has since formed around it. They include Malays and Burghers who participate in *mawlid* celebrations for the Prophet Muhammad and the *Qutb*.

Some of the American visitors who travel to Sri Lanka occasionally visit this site, but this takes place less often since it is a distance away from Colombo and Jaffna, but most likely because it forms a minor node in the larger spaces attributed to Bawa. A room remains with Bawa’s bed and other personal memorabilia, which has become a center of local activity for Muslims. Having only learned of this site during my fieldwork in Sri Lanka, I was not able to spend much time here, but future work on the Serendib Sufi Study Circle (SSSC) needs to include this Matale site, especially to capture how practices within Bawa’s Sri Lankan contingency have diversely developed due to different regional demographics.

#### *Bawa’s Visits to Sri Lanka from Philadelphia*

During Bawa’s fifteen years in the United States, he returned to Sri Lanka four times, first in May 1972 till 1973. Then he returned again from February 1974 to July 1975. It was at this time that God’s House, known as Mankumban, was completed with the direction of Bawa and the work of both his Tamil and American disciples on February 17, 1975 on Velanai Island. He returned to Sri Lanka on November 1976. During this time his American and Tamil disciples helped complete the second floor of the *ashram* in 1977 and went back to Philadelphia in August



1978. These visits form the basis of similar trips that take part today amongst the Fellowship members.<sup>278</sup> Those who visited Sri Lanka with Bawa immediately noticed that he was more comfortable in his *ashram*, his own domain, than any other space he instituted, even the ones in Philadelphia. Hanal Thambi, a senior disciple of Bawa from Philadelphia, noted this from his visit to Sri Lanka with Bawa:

[...] Going to Sri Lanka was good [...] for a couple reasons. Well, one thing going there, especially when he was in the *ashram* [...] you know that really was his own domain. So he could [...] I think he operated a little differently there than he did either here [Philadelphia] or even when he was in Ajwad's in Colombo, you know Ameen and Ajwad, because even though they gave the house over to them [Serendib Sufi Study Circle], it was still their house. You know he was very respectful of that. On the one hand, [...] here, in the United States, you know like you can't do some of the things he was doing here that he could do there because here, if you're like telling people to take certain herbs and things and doing some stuff you know [...] it may not be legal [i.e., exorcisms] to do some of the things that he was able to do there with people.<sup>279</sup>

As Hanal Thambi alludes to in his comments above, during these trips American disciples who traveled with Bawa were exposed to Bawa's life in his Sri Lankan context, which differed significantly from the American one. Bawa's work of healings and exorcisms that gained him

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<sup>278</sup> These visits are captured in Chapter 6, where I detail my pilgrimage with some members of the Fellowship from North America to Sri Lanka in the subsection *Pilgrimages to Bawa's Spaces in Sri Lanka by Members of the Fellowship*.

<sup>279</sup> He asked that I use the name given to him by Bawa, so I have respected his request. Hanal Thambi, interview with author, the garden of the Bawa Muhiyaddeen Fellowship Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. April 12, 2014.

fame in the early days did not end when he returned to Sri Lanka from Philadelphia, though these healing practices were not commonly performed in America, at least not as it was publicly completed in Jaffna.

Nurualmina is a disciple of Bawa who met him in Philadelphia during her years of spiritual seeking. She also traveled with Bawa to Sri Lanka. She gives some insight through an experience she had with Bawa when she stayed at the *ashram*. Noticing the crowds of visitors waiting to see Bawa on a daily basis, she decided to see what Bawa was doing:

So I decided I was going to sit beside his chair and pretend like I was him and just see what it was like to do that. So I didn't say anything, I just decided to do it so I went up sat up against his chair, got a little pillow and sat there as the line came up and I didn't understand a lot [of] what was in Tamil, but I mean it was like you could tell these people were really suffering you know from whatever money and physical pain and whatever it was like intense you know, after about three hours of it [laughing] I was like kind of passing out and he looked over at me, he hadn't been ignoring me the whole time, he looked over at me and he started guffawing, he had a really good laugh, he just started rolling with laughter and he said "what are you doing?" [laughing] I said "I decided to try it out Bawa and see what it is like, see what you are doing everyday and what it feels like" and he started laughing and laughing and he said "how could I do this for even a second, do you think I could do this for even a second? If I did this for a second I would be dead!" He said "I can't do this." He said "only God can do this, how can I do this?"<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> Nurualmina, interview with author, Toronto Fellowship Branch, Toronto, Canada December 21, 2013. Nurualmina met Bawa in Philadelphia. I interviewed her during her business trip to Toronto, Canada. She requested that only her the name given by Bawa be used.

The experience captured in the comments of Nurualmina point again to Bawa's ministry of service to the Tamils in Jaffna, one that Bawa understood was facilitated and directed by God, and not himself. Bawa was known to have used a cane to try to negotiate with "demons" and "spirits" to leave willingly but other times he would also "beat" the spirits out of the possessed. His American followers who visited Sri Lanka soon realized this other aspect to Bawa's work, which shocked many of them.

Bawa also gave discourses in Sri Lanka similar to what was noted in America, though of course he did not require translators as was the case among his English speaking disciples in America. Michael Toomey who is from Kanas City heard about Bawa from his brother. Toomey was studying "Oriental Philosophy" and encountered different spiritual and meditative traditions in the early 1970s. Being interested in Bawa from what he heard through his brother, Toomey travelled to Philadelphia to meet Bawa on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1972 at the age of twenty-four. He expressed to me that Bawa and his teachings resonated with him and so he eventually moved into the Fellowship Headquarters in Philadelphia. He shared with me some of his experiences when he first visited Sri Lanka with Bawa:

So it was just Bawa and God and he would give public talks, he'd give talk in Colombo and annually he gave a public thing in Jaffna. On the radio he would talk and then he would speak in the main town hall in Jaffna, and then he'd invite everybody to come to the *ashram* in all of Jaffna [...]. So we would spend three or four days cutting things, and he had big cauldrons [laughing] and the woodmen would come, the woodchopper, and chop wood and the people of the jungle, the jungle people, they speak Tamil but they're really even way before the Tamils. They lived in caves until the mid 80's I think.

So the cave, jungle cave people [...] they would bring special things to Bawa from the jungle up, up there [...] We spent days cutting banana leaves and squares and so we would have like a thousand people would be in the *ashram*, we'd feed them all and they would leave and they had little coins with coloured paper wrapped into them each as a gift you know, because there was a lot of grace and coming to get something from Bawa so that, that was a huge thing and then Bawa when he did talk, even if it was just in a, like a formal meeting of the Serendib Sufi Study Circle in Colombo, he would ask us. He'd say "okay you just have to speak for five minutes so write it, write something and talk, and speak wisdom, say what you're learning."<sup>281</sup>

The practice of service and feeding the visitors, and the giving of discourses seen in Philadelphia, is in effect the continuation of the ministry of Bawa from Jaffna to the Tamil Hindus, Muslims and anybody else who was interested in Bawa

The extent of Bawa's influence and fame beyond any religious community is also evident in his political activism. In Sri Lanka it was Ranasinghe Premadasa (d. 1993), the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka who was assassinated by the LTTE, who pursued Bawa for advice. Premadasa sought out many holy sages across Sri Lanka hoping to find someone to help him get elected into the government and finally he had heard about Bawa. Premadasa was a Sinhalese Buddhist and Bawa was known as a Tamil Muslim and so due to the intensified ethnic and political conflicts in

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<sup>281</sup> Michael Toomey, interview with author, at the Farm of Bawa Muhaiyadeen in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, April 19, 2014.

Sri Lanka unfolding in the 1970s, Premadasa's visit with Bawa had to be kept secretive.<sup>282</sup> Nurualmina, who was present during the first visit by Premadasa, shared with me the following:

He had a dream [...], Premadasa, that there was a holy man on the island who could help him with this problem that he saw looming but he wasn't Buddhist. So he searched, he had his people search and search and they found Bawa. So he came at midnight very secretly to the *ashram* to meet Bawa, it was this big thing we were all preparing for like we knew but we had to keep a secret. And he and Bawa would talk and he would be escorted out at 2am or something. This happened over and over. And then with the elections [...] approaching I guess I don't [...] understand what was going on with the elections, but it was a big deal. It was like a big deal of how it would work out in terms of the country would work out and Bawa was really into. I mean he was like watching TV for every election results and like praying but you know it didn't come out the way he would have liked you know and it was a disappointment, Bawa saw what was coming down the pipe and he was in pain. You know it was hard, because Sri Lanka was really going to be hurt and his people were going to be hurt and everybody was going to be hurt you know. So that was a big thing to be present for that was really interesting.<sup>283</sup>

Visits from state officials and involvement in politics, such as that with Premadasa in Sri Lanka or Bawa's letter writing campaigns in Philadelphia during the Iranian hostage crisis of

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<sup>282</sup> Premadasa and the President of Sri Lanka J. R. Jayewardene both visited Bawa regularly in Colombo at the home of Dr. Macan-Markar. In 1982, during Bawa's final trip, they visited and even shared a moment looking over the article of Bawa in *Time Magazine*. Premadasa eventually won the elections. He was the president from January 2, 1989 to May 1, 1993, while Jayewardene was Prime Minister from February 1978 to January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1989. Premadasa was assassinated in Colombo by a suicide bombing orchestrated by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE) on May 1<sup>st</sup> 1993. For more on this history please see Chapter 4's subsection *Sufism in Sri Lanka*.

<sup>283</sup> Nurualmina, Interview with author, Toronto Fellowship Branch, Toronto, Canada December 21, 2013.

Americans forms a consistent facet of Bawa's broader ministry. Bawa attempted to counter-act the misrepresentation of Islam in popular media by political and religious leaders in America, while in Sri Lanka, he worked to calm ensuing ethnic riots. There was a tendency in Bawa to work towards peace and justice through activism in his immediate surroundings, which promoted non-violence and dialogue as a means to create understanding and respect. This has led scholar-activists, such as Scott Kugle and Sa'diyya Shaikh<sup>284</sup> (2006) to associate the tradition of "engaged Sufism" with Bawa, while Bawa is also utilized in Peace and Conflict Studies in Islam (Said, Funk et al 2001).<sup>285</sup>

As in Philadelphia, where Bawa attracted crowds from diverse religious, racial and socio-economic backgrounds, the same was true in Jaffna, Colombo and Matale, where visitors came to hear him speak, to receive food from a guru and to seek his spiritual and personal advice. Bawa's final trip to Sri Lanka was in December 1980 to November 1982, when he returned to Philadelphia. 1982 forms a seminal period in Sri Lanka, as events that unfolded in this time period led to the Eelam Wars (civil wars) in Sri Lanka. During this time riots were common and Jaffna, where Bawa's *ashram* and Mankumban are located, proved to be under precarious circumstances. This limited travel for Bawa and his disciples between Colombo and Jaffna.

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<sup>284</sup> Scott Kugle is an Associate Professor of South Asian and Islamic Studies at Emory College of Arts and Sciences in the Middle Eastern and South Asian Studies. His fields of expertise include Sufism, Islamic society in South Asia and issues of gender and sexuality. His books include *Sufis and Saint's Boddies: Mysticism, Corporeality and Sacred Power in Islamic Culture* (2007) and *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Muslims* (2010). His region of research his in India and Pakistan. Sa'diyya Shaikh is an Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Her area of research is on Islamic Studies and Gender Studies. She authored *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn Arabi, Gender and Sexuality* (2012). She employs gender-sensitive readings of hadith, Quranic exegesis and Sufi texts; theoretical and political debates on Islam and feminism, religion and gender-based violence, contemporary Muslim women's embodied, experiential and everyday modes of understanding Quranic teachings. Both of these scholars maintain personal connections to the Fellowship community and to Bawa Muhaiyaddeen.

<sup>285</sup> Please see the special thematic issue of the *Journal of Islamic Studies* on "Engaged Sufism" edited by Kugle and Shaikh, and *Peace and Conflict Resolution in Islam: Precept and Practice*, edited by Abdul Aziz Said, Nathan C. Funk et al (2001) (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America).

Bawa never returned to Sri Lanka again after this final visit, leaving the institutions that he formed without a physical leader. As in Philadelphia, in Sri Lanka it is understood that Bawa remains the spiritual authority of his communities. This forms another consistent parallel from Sri Lanka to America. The question, then, remains how have the institutions that were formed by Bawa developed in Sri Lanka in a post-charismatic era? Is it similar or different to what was experienced of Bawa's space and people in North America? What practices are commemorated and who attend daily prayers and annual celebrations? Who utilize and maintain his sacred spaces? It is these questions that the remaining portion of this chapter engages with.

### **Ritual Activities and Personal Piety in Bawa's *Ashram***

#### *Daily Prayers at Bawa's Ashram*

Having provided the general layout of Bawa's spaces in Sri Lanka, I describe in more detail the rituals and events that I observed at the *ashram* during my time in Jaffna between July and August of 2013. Since part of my visit was during Ramadan, it is the breaking of fast (*iftar*) that I focus on below along with daily prayers at the *ashram*. Daily communal prayers take place at the *ashram* usually twice a day, once in the afternoon and during my visit, they also took place just prior to the breaking of fast for Ramadan, all of which were led by the female custodian of the *ashram*, the matron.

Prior to meeting Bawa, the matron was a schoolteacher, but became unwell. Suffering from chronic stomach issues, she visited many doctors and gurus, yet never got well. Eventually having heard of Bawa, she visited him and according to what she relayed to me, he immediately cured her of her illness. Though she visited Bawa with the intention of only receiving a cure for her illness, she felt drawn to Bawa and started coming to see him at the *ashram* when he

discoursed and became interested in his teachings. She encountered Bawa in 1971 just prior to his departure to Philadelphia for the first time. At the time, Periya Teacher and Aachi two Tamil devotees were the two female caretakers of the *ashram*. Since their passing the current matron, according to her understanding, was chosen by Bawa as matron. The *ashram*, as noted by Mauroof's study, has always been under the care of a "matron" and the current custodian has continued this tradition of maintaining it as the female custodians before her have done, who do so because of their devotion to Bawa. Working closely with the matron, is another senior disciple in Jaffna, named Engineer Thambi.

I asked him how he met Bawa, which I noted in my field notes:

He said that when they were building the *ashram* in Jaffna they needed someone to come and fix all the wiring for the lights. And so he was called, hence the name Engineer Thambi. He had gone to the *ashram* to complete a job and once he got there, he asked whom the *ashram* was for, and he asked if he could come to visit swami and they said he could come and see him on Sunday. And Engineer Thambi asked if he could only come on Sunday and the devotee said no, he could come anytime. And he asked if he could come now and the devotee said that he could now come. Bawa was sitting on his bed and he had gone and seen him. And that was the beginning of his relationship with Bawa. Engineer Thambi said that he had always been interested in spirituality [...] and heard of other gurus, saints and Sufis locally.

Both Engineer Thambi and the matron act as non-official institutional leaders in Jaffna. Engineer Thambi resides with his family, but the matron resides at the *ashram*, though she visits her family occasionally. As such, she leads daily rituals at the *ashram* and welcomes regular



devotees who visit both locally and from America. It is they who collectively maintain the rituals at the *ashram* and the Mankumban, especially during *mawlid*s or Friday prayers that continue to unfold in Bawa's spaces in Jaffna.

The matron begins the afternoon prayers by walking through all the rooms in the *ashram*, completing her own personal devotion and making sure that oil lamps have sufficient oil and tending to any other details in Bawa's room. Once she completes this, two mats are laid out in front of Bawa's bed in the main prayer hall, one directly in front of Bawa's bed, which is only for the females. This is where the matron sits during prayers. In front of this mat there is also a



Figure 5.10: The main area of the *ashram* in which prayers take place on a daily basis. In this photograph, devotees are venerating Bawa's bed. Most of the participants who take part in these daily prayers, that involve the recitation of the *salawat* to the Prophet Muhammad in Arabic, are Hindu devotees of Bawa. Photograph taken by author in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, July 2013.

silver pot with burning incense that slowly releases smoke towards Bawa's bed. On the right side of Bawa's bed, against the wall, another mat is laid for males. Against the pillar that stands near Bawa's bed is a separate prayer carpet near the cassette prayer. I asked the matron who this spot was for. She explained that one day, a man had come to the *ashram*, wearing a large turban and *sirong* (wrap) like Bawa. He sat precisely at that spot, prayed and left. When she saw him, she explained to me that she knew it was Bawa. Ever since that particular visit, she has laid down the prayer carpet for him and placed the cassette for prayers in that spot, suggesting that the voice that emerges from the cassette (i.e., Bawa) is leading those present behind it in prayer.

Once the matron was ready, she begins by playing an audiocassette. It is a poor quality recording (clearly indicating its prolonged use) of Bawa singing *Surah al-Fatiha* and *Surah al-Ikhlās* in Arabic. At the completion of these two recitations, Bawa also sings a *dua* (intercessory prayer) in Tamil asking for protection and guidance.<sup>286</sup> Once the cassette ends, she begins the singing of the Tamil and Arabic song *Engal Bawa* (*Our Bawa*). All those present join in singing:

Precious Bawa, Golden One, our Sheikh of *Gnanam* (wisdom), Muhaiyaddeen,

Let us meet together with love and praise as the Virtuous One.

*La ilaha ill Allahu, La ilaha ill Allah* (no god, but God)

*La ilaha, ill Allahu, Muhammadur-Rasulullah* (there is no god, but God and Muhammad is his messenger)

As the Guru, lacking nothing, as the one complete and good,

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<sup>286</sup> The quality of the cassette was quite poor that even my recording of the prayers and my listening to it repeatedly made it difficult to fully transcribe the Tamil portions of Bawa's prayers. From the fragments that I was able to translate, Bawa invokes Allah's names of *Ya Rahim* and *Ya Rahman* and concludes by calling to "the Lord of the universes" (*Rabbil alamin*).

You show the Treasure without equal, O Sheikh of *Gnanam*, Muhaiyaddeen

Chorus

To swim the roiling sea of birth, to cross with the *Kalimah* (word) boat,

You're the rudder, which guides us to shore, O Sheikh of *Gnanam*, Muhaiyaddeen.

Chorus

As the stag, as the doe, as the Limitless Ray of Light,

As pure honey, as the *Deen*, you're the Sheikh of *Gnanam*, Muhaiyaddeen.

Chorus

As pure gold, as precious jewels, as ruby, as pearl, and emerald,

As jeweled light within the eye, you're mingled with effulgent light.

Remain forever in our hearts, O Sheikh of *Gnanam* Muhaiyaddeen.

Chorus

As the grace, as the wisdom, as the Guru within wisdom,

You're the effulgence mingled with the Guru, spreading

Everywhere O Allahu.<sup>287</sup>

This is the same song that the Fellowship sings on commemorative events for Bawa.<sup>288</sup> Unlike Philadelphia where transliterations are handed out to those present, here in Bawa's *ashram* this song is a significant part of their daily prayers. Their devotion is to Bawa, who as the song expresses, is the guru of wisdom. But the invocation of *la ilaha, ill Allahu, Muhammadur-Rasulullah*, in Arabic in the chorus, also points to the focus of Allah and Muhammad in close proximity to the guru of wisdom. In terms of devotional focus, these three concepts (i.e., Allah, Muhammad and Bawa) form the orientation of veneration. This is further affirmed as immediately after singing *Engal Bawa*, the matron leads in the singing of the *salawat* to the Prophet Muhammad:

*sallallahu 'ala Muhammad; sallallahu 'alaihi wa sallam sallallahu 'ala Muhammad; ya Rabbi salli 'alaihi wa sallim* [May Allah bless Muhammad; may Allah bless him and grant him eternal peace. May Allah bless Muhammad; O my Lord. Bless him and grant him peace].<sup>289</sup>

The *salawat* is another notable similarity from Jaffna to Philadelphia, along with the subsequent branches of the Fellowship in North America and Sri Lanka. The *salawat* is repeated at the end of all Fellowship meetings and *salat* in the *masjid* of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen. At the *ashram* it is

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<sup>287</sup> I have kept to the transliteration of Arabic and the translation of English used by the Fellowship for the purposes of consistency.

<sup>288</sup> Please see Chapter 2 subsection on the *mawlid*s for this.

<sup>289</sup> I have kept to the transliteration of Arabic and the translation of English used by the Fellowship for the purposes of consistency.

part of the central recitation that takes place during daily prayers. The recitation of the *salawat* rose a critical moment of intrigue for me as I wondered if those present understood the “Muhammad” invoked in the *salawat* to be the Prophet of Islam or its namesake as evident in Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen. When I asked the matron who she was praying too, Bawa or *Andevan* (God)? She replied with a smile “they both are the same.” When I further queried about her conversion to Islam and if she attends *masjid*, she told me that Bawa never told anyone to convert to anything. She added that she does not attend another mosque in town. Her service and prayers to Bawa at the *ashram* and Mankumban was her Islam. These fluid perceptions of Bawa, the Prophet Muhammad, and God form the basis of devotion at the *ashram*, one that I similarly highlighted in Philadelphia. The manifestation of these beliefs into ritual particularities, be it praying in the *masjid* or venerating Bawa’s bed in the *ashram*, reflects the spectrums of personal pieties and understandings of the followers of Bawa, ones that are even more diverse in Jaffna.

### *Iftar at Bawa’s Ashram*

During Ramadan, immediately after the afternoon prayers described above, meal preparations would begin for the breaking of fast. One of the young girls who works at the *ashram* begins to sort through the vegetables to begin the cooking process. Depending on who was at the *ashram* helping (this really varied with individual’s schedules i.e., tending to family or business) tasks would be divided for the preparation process of the *kanji* (rice soup), the traditional dish that many Muslims in Sri Lanka break fast with. The preparation was a communal effort of all those who are present, mostly females. Since my presence during these events became quite regular, the matron eventually gave into my requests to assist with the preparations and sent me into the

back kitchen to help the other females with the cutting of the vegetables. Initially, the four to five females were apprehensive around me, and my attempts to cut vegetables without a proper cutting board while squatting on the floor. My minor successes of not cutting myself meant that the women at the *ashram* not only began to trust me to be able to complete more difficult tasks of cutting carrots and cabbages, even green-peas into small pieces, it also meant that we all slowly relaxed around each other and began to converse.

In the beginning the topics were broad, they were more interested in me and what my religion was, my relationship status and details about my family, which allowed me the opportunity to inquire the same about them. I discovered that most of them were Hindu devotees



Figure 5.11: The *kanji* in the ancillary shrine and will be served once the prayers are completed. Photograph taken by author, July 2013.

of Bawa. Two of the females, who were siblings, actually grew up around Bawa. Bawa healed their mother. This became one of the common narratives that I found amongst the regular devotees. They grew up in the *ashram* or their family knew Bawa as he cured them of some illness and resulted in their complete devotion to him as their guru. Healing forms a central component in the ministry of Bawa be it as he completed it in Sri Lanka, especially Jaffna amongst the Tamil Hindu devotees or in Philadelphia.<sup>290</sup>

During the *kanji* preparations I also noticed that either a cassette of Bawa reciting *dhikr* or one of his discourses or songs was played in the background. This again is similar to Philadelphia when food is cooked in the Fellowship Headquarters or in the kitchen at the *mazar* in Coatesville. It is Bawa and his teachings that form the basis of all activity from the cooking of *kanji* in the *ashram* to the preparation of meals for *mawlid*s in Philadelphia. Sometimes the women I was cutting vegetables with (again most of them who identified as being Hindu) would join in the *dhikr* in the audio-cassette by repeating Arabic names of Allah with Bawa.

Eventually the outdoor fire pit was set by one of the gentleman who helps the matron. It is set outside near the front kitchen in the verandah area. Placed on top of this fire pit was a large cauldron. The matron cupped three handfuls of rice into the cauldron while looking at the picture of Bawa in the prayer hall that was visible while standing in the courtyard. Then all those present in the *ashram* did the same. Once the *kanji* was completed two males would move the cauldron into ancillary shrine behind the stairs, from where the *kanji* is served and the fast was broken, as captured in the photograph in Figure 5.11.

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<sup>290</sup> Throughout my research I heard stories of healing, or miracles (*karamat*) attributed to Bawa, especially at his *mazar*. For instance, a Fellowship family who was unable to conceive a child, went to the *mazar*, and requested this intention to be fulfilled through prayer at the *mazar*. After making pilgrimage to the *mazar* and praying in this space, they relayed to me they received a child because of Bawa's grace.

Before these prayers began, the matron and the others went into the ancillary shrine, and broke their fast with some dates and water from the well. Thereafter sweet milk tea was served. Eventually everyone took their place, either on mats for the females or for the males and began the prayers. The matron began by sprinkling three rounds of incense in a fire pot in front of Bawa's bed to get the smoke rising again. Everyone present did the same. Some also went to Bawa's bed and performed personal acts of devotions, either by venerating the bed or the photographs of Bawa with their hands or even by kissing the bed. Then the same cassette of Bawa was played, followed by the singing of *Engal Bawa* and finally the *salawat* to the Prophet Muhammad was recited. After the *salawat* some of those present, mainly the women (including matron) prostrated fully, touching their forehead to the ground.

The matron went into the ancillary shrine room again and began pouring the *kanji* into the bowls and distributed them to everyone present. By now, the front gates to the *ashram* were opened so that all the children who live on the main street that were waiting came rushing in and they also received *kanji*. These young children were quite cheeky and mischievous. They ran into the house and the matron often reprimanded them for running around the *ashram*. Once they calmed down, they assembled in a line and received a bowl of *kanji* from the female devotees who were serving it and sat in rows eating, some went for seconds and thirds. When they finished, they also took some home in a bowl they brought with them or in a plastic bag.

I stayed at the *ashram* for two weeks during Ramadan and this was the regular practice that I observed and participated in. I noticed that women were at the forefront of the rituals and activities taking place at the *ashram*. The custodian of the *ashram* is a female; she led the prayers and broke the fast, while the other female devotees came after work elsewhere or after tending to their immediate families to assist and participate in rituals. Two families lived in homes that



were attached to the *ashram* and it also soon became evident that those coming to visit the *ashram* for prayers had known Bawa throughout generations in their family, and these families were mainly Hindu, but were affiliated with Bawa, who they understood to be a Muslim teacher. One family for instance came to Bawa when their mother was unwell. They reside next to the *ashram*, and their daughter helps during the preparation for *kanji*, while another family, is active at the *ashram* on a daily basis. Generational transmission of devotion to Bawa is also notable in his Fellowship in North America, especially in Philadelphia and Coatesville, the main center of activity.<sup>291</sup> Children born into the Fellowship are part of youth and children's meetings. So not only grandparents (direct disciples of Bawa) but also second generation of Bawa's disciples and now the third generation of Bawa's disciples form a growing demographic, one that future studies need to address.<sup>292</sup>

The way Bawa's teachings have been experienced and lived out from locality to locality has varied based on regional religious and ethnic demographics. Since the Muslims in Jaffna were expelled and the majority of the Tamils left in Jaffna after 1990 were Hindus, they form the main contingency of following in Jaffna during my fieldwork. One cannot, however, necessarily suggest that this is a recent phenomenon, especially when considered in light of Mauroof's study. As he indicated in the 1960s during *mawlid* celebrations at the *ashram*, there were diverse attendees from different religious backgrounds, of which most were Hindus. Hindu devotees break fast during Ramadan, they participate in daily prayers by reciting prayers of blessings to the Prophet Muhammad and even recite *dhikr* individually. They understand Bawa is a Muslim teacher and their devotion to him as Hindus is not a theological contradiction. In our case study,

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<sup>291</sup> I highlighted the differing Fellowship identities in Chapter 2, please see this chapter for this discussion.

<sup>292</sup> These developments generationally are also further discussed in *The Future of The Fellowship* subsection in Chapter 9.

then, Sufism, Islam and Hinduism as they are embodied, share spaces, rituals and beliefs, especially in relation to Bawa in the Sri Lankan context. If the *ashram* forms one central site in Jaffna, across the Palk Strait via the Jaffna-Pannai-Kayts Road amongst the archipelago of islands sits another. It is on this island that Mankumban or “God’s House” is dedicated to Maryam and to Bawa.

## Conclusions

This chapter situated Bawa’s first institutions in Jaffna and mapped the general layout of Bawa’s various sacred spaces in Sri Lanka that continue to thrive at present. I gleaned from Mauroof’s dissertation and situated them with my interviews with senior disciples of Bawa to illustrate the early life of the *ashram*, especially as it centered on rituals such as *mawlid*s, a ritual that I illustrated in Chapter 2’s discussion of the Fellowship. Much of Bawa’s early life in Jaffna was focused on serving the many people who came to see him for cures from physical and spiritual ailments (i.e., exorcisms) and for financial and familial advice. This was also a period that saw the development of his first known chief institution, namely his *ashram* in Jaffna while the foundations for Mankumban were laid on Velanai Island. But it would not be completed until years later with the arrival of Bawa’s American disciples to Sri Lanka. In this chapter I described the *ashram* in Jaffna, the Serendib Sufi Study Circle’s Center in Colombo and the Matale Branch in central Kandy. In addition to these spaces, I also drew attention to the farm of Bawa that has recently been refurbished in Puliyanakulam, in northern Sri Lanka.

In the second half of this chapter, I turned my attention specifically to the current activities and ritual life of the *ashram* in Jaffna, because throughout my fieldwork in Sri Lanka I found that these were the sites that were most active amongst all the spaces that I visited across

Sri Lanka. In the *ashram*, then, I provided ethnographic description of two ritual activities that I participated in during my fieldwork. They included daily prayers and the breaking of fast during Ramadan, activities in which I found females proactive, more so than their male counter parts. Tamil Hindus, especially those with generational familial ties to Bawa, regularly attend these rituals. Moreover, it was the female custodian of the *ashram* that led the activities and prayers, a figure that I discuss further in Chapter 8.

In this section's discussion of spaces of Bawa in Sri Lanka, I also began to compare and contrast some similar and contrasting tendencies between the Fellowship in Pennsylvania and Bawa's sites in Sri Lanka. In doing so, I began to trace the tendencies found in the Fellowship in North America to particular practices in Jaffna. In this chapter these examples included the recitation of the *salawat* and *dhikr*. However, some practices differed vastly, such as the lack of *salat* in Jaffna, which is one central feature of the Fellowship in Pennsylvania. The ritual of communal veneration of Bawa's bed through the use of religious accoutrements so central in Jaffna is not as present in Philadelphia. Tracing Bawa's communities from North America to Sri Lanka provides a glimpse of moments of ritual and devotional continuities and transformations. There is still one more space to encounter. It is arguably the most striking sacred space in this network formed by Bawa. Similar to the *mazar* of Bawa in Coatesville, Mankumban on Velanai Island forms a parallel institutional significance within the communities of Bawa in Sri Lanka and also among his North American followers, what makes this space so distinctive? What rituals take place at Mankumban? Who utilizes this space?

## Chapter 6

### Mankumban: the *Mazar* of Maryam and Bawa

#### Introduction

This chapter contextualizes one of the most significant sites in Bawa's transnational network, Mankumban. A mosque-shrine complex dedicated to Mary, the mother of Jesus (Isa) and Bawa. Where Chapter 5 explored the activities that continue to take place in the *ashram* amongst predominant Hindu followers of Bawa, this chapter similarly provides the historical development of Mankumban and gives further ethnographic analysis of ritual activities that evolve in this mosque-shrine complex. It seeks to explore questions such as who are its primary adherents and visitors? What purposes does it serve? And why is it significant?

The *ashram* was Bawa's residence where he tended to those in need of his assistance and where he discoursed. It was also additionally the space in which Bawa hosted holy days, such as *mawlid*s. Mankumban, on the other hand, forms a distinct space in the broader network of Bawa's communities. In the institutional definitions Mankumban is both a shrine for Maryam and a *palli* (mosque) in local parlance, making it a *masjid-mazar* (mosque-shrine) complex. At Mankumban weekly *jum'ah* and daily prayers are held, similar to those in the *ashram*, along with the breaking of fast during Ramadan and *mawlid*s, concurrently with the *ashram*. Comparable to the *ashram*, its main attendees are Hindus. Some of those who attend the *ashram* also visit Mankumban, but Mankumban attracts local villagers from the immediate neighbourhood. Mankumban's significance though is due to its association with Maryam (Mary), which leads to her veneration at this site. This connection to Mary, I submit in this chapter, is based on both the historical personage of Maryam and her centrality in Sufi cosmology. As a

result, Mankumban represents a space and tradition that is not matched spatially or in communal devotion in North America.

The *mazar* in Pennsylvania is sacred because it entombs Bawa, a friend of God who emits *baraka* (blessings), and so has gained popularity beyond the Fellowship community. For some members of the Fellowship in North America and across the globe, Mankumban is a site of equal consequence, which results in the completion of pilgrimage to it because of its affinity to Maryam and Bawa. In the broader network of this transnational community, both of these *mazars*, one in Pennsylvania and the other in Velanai Island form nodes around which circuits of pilgrimages revolve, or what I call *parallel pilgrimages*. The visitations to Bawa's *ashram* and



Figure 6.1: The *masjid-mazar* (mosque-shrine) complex that is known as Mankumban or “God’s House.” It is in the village of Makumban (Mankumpan) in Velenai Island in Northern Sri Lanka. Photograph by author, August 2013.

Mankumban in Jaffna become substantial acts of devotion that reaffirm to Fellowship members their commitment to Bawa. They also serve as a means to reconnect with the homeland of their Sufi teacher and *shaykh*.

### ***A Masjid-Mazar Complex***

Driving from Bawa's *ashram* in Jaffna one must take the Jaffna-Pannai-Kayts Road to arrive at Mankumban. It is a narrow road that runs across the Palk Strait to Velanai Island, which is off the coast of Jaffna Peninsula in northern Sri Lanka. Velanai Island consists of several villages, such as the major town of Kayts, or Urkavarthurai as it is known in Tamil, other ones include Mankumpan or Mankumban, from which the *masjid-mazar* complex gets its name. This road to the island, which barely contains enough room for two vehicles to pass by safely, was recently reconstructed after the end of the civil war. Fisher men and women are often seen tending to their nets as they dabble through the knee-deep water, sometimes diving into the strait and other times wading through the water for seafood. Motorcyclists occasionally pull over to take a quick break or even to dip into the strait to cool off from the heat of the searing sun. The end of this narrow road across the strait is signaled by a military checkpoint. Now that the war has ended this military checkpoint is more a symbolic presence, though it also is a means to prevent any possible new threats or uprisings. The several times that I crossed this narrow road, I often feared my imminent fall into the strait as I travelled on tour buses with pilgrims from North America, in vans rented by visitors from Colombo and on a rickety auto-rickshaw with local devotees. Neither I, nor the company I was travelling with were ever stopped and questioned by any military personnel.

Past the checkpoint, the island showcases its barren land interwoven with lagoons and palm trees waving in the dry wind as cows meander aimlessly avoiding Hindu temples and Catholic churches that are dotted throughout. This main road leads directly into Kayts, the largest of the small towns on this island. Though prior to entering this town, an immediate left takes you down a different rough path and it is at the end of this road that one veers directly onto the village of Mankumpan. Mankumpan the village and Mankumban the building constructed by Bawa sit on the shoreline of Chaddy Beach, across a Sri Lankan army base. Most outsiders who come down this path do so to visit the famous Chaddy Beach, which received its name from its shoreline, which is shaped like a pot. This popular local beach with its fresh seaweed mingled water is held by the shores' white sands and hosts a series of religious communities on its threshold.

For instance, a Roman Catholic Church is tucked in deeper off the shoreline and is dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Popular narratives amongst locals, including my own family who is from this island, informed me of the church's special proximity to Mary. Some have even claimed to see apparitions of her. A few miles away and sitting right on the shoreline is another mosque-shrine complex dedicated to *shaykh* Sultan Abdul Qadir Voliyyullah, who is locally dated to 1598, of whom little is known.<sup>293</sup> Yet the shared space of a *masjid-mazar* complex signals the development of Islam with sainted personalities, such as Bawa, as the root of Islam in Sri Lanka, one that is now a tradition of Islam and Sufism in North America.

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<sup>293</sup> During my fieldwork at Mankumban, Roshan from the Toronto Branch, and I tried to visiting this *masjid-mazar* complex neighbouring Mankumban. There was a woman who was sitting outside the main entrance to the building with her children. After offering each other *salaams*, we asked her if we could go inside and she said that we could not. Roshan explained that she was Muslim and the woman smiled back and said, "so was she." Women are not usually allowed in most of the *masjids*, in Sri Lanka, not even this particular *masjid-mazar* complex. So I was unable to go inside this *masjid* to explore this mosque-shrine complex further.

Ahamed Kabir, who was serving as the Tamil imam of the *masjid* in Philadelphia met Bawa in Jaffna when he was working as a pearl diver.<sup>294</sup> During our interview in Philadelphia he relayed a story of when Bawa had gone to visit this mosque-shrine and its ancient *oli* (saint), whose tomb forms a part of the *masjid*. According to Kabir's account, when Bawa walked into the *masjid*, the grave started to rumble. Bawa, noticing that the rumbling was due to the saint's attempt to pay obeisance to him, reputedly put out his right hand and motioned the saint to rest, uttering "Thambi, thambi (younger brother, younger brother)." Those present, including Ahamed Kabir, were shocked that Bawa was calling this ancient saint "thambi." According to Kabir it was after the news spread of what took place between Bawa and this saint entombed in this *masjid* that Bawa's fame began to grow in the region. For Kabir it was a personal turning point, as it was the moment when he started having faith in Bawa, his *shaykh* and teacher.<sup>295</sup> It is in the surroundings of the ocean water, white sands, tall palm trees and sacred spaces (mosques, churches and temples) that Mankumban, completed by Bawa and his disciples sits.

#### *An Abode in Honour of the Feminine: Maryam and Mankumban*

Bawa purchased this property on Velanai Island in 1954 because of his understanding of its proximity to Maryam (Mary, Jesus/Isa's mother). Some of the senior disciples of Bawa suggested that this proximity was based on the water itself. The spot on the beach signals a theme encountered throughout the spaces associated with Bawa: water. From the Headquarters of the Fellowship in Philadelphia to the *mazar* in Coatesville and his *ashram* in Jaffna, Bawa repeatedly constructed a water system either through pumps or through digging a well. On a

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<sup>294</sup> For more on Ahamed Kabir please see Chapter 2's subsection *Negotiating Sacred Spaces and Practices*.

<sup>295</sup> Ahamed Kabir, interview with author, Bawa's room in the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. April 16, 2014.



practical level, this seems like the valuable foresight of a farmer, who was aware of the need for water in cultivating land and vegetation. However, with Mankumban and its position on the shoreline, and the well outside its entrance, one could speculate a far more metaphysical significance of water, perhaps in terms of its relationship to Mary.

In the chapter devoted to Jesus in his *Bezels of Wisdom*,<sup>296</sup> Ibn ‘Arabi speaks particularly of the relationship of Mary and Gabriel in the creation of Jesus (1980, 174). In the opening poem to this chapter on Jesus Ibn ‘Arabi writes:

From the water of Mary or from the breath of Gabriel,  
In the form of a mortal fashioned clay,  
The Spirit came into existence in an essence  
Purged of Nature’s taint, which is called *Sijjin* [Hell].  
Because of this, his sojourn was prolonged,  
Enduring, by decree, more than a thousand years.  
A spirit from none other than God.  
So that he might raise the dead and bring forth birds from clay.  
And became worthy to be associated with his Lord,  
By which he exerted great influence, both high and low.  
God purified him in body and made him transcendent  
In the Spirit, making him like Himself in creating (174-175).

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<sup>296</sup> I am using the Classics of Western Spirituality series translation of *Ibn Al’Arabi: the Bezels of Wisdom* (1980), which is translated and introduced by R. W. J. Austin.

In the first sentence of the poem Ibn ‘Arabi evokes “from the water of Mary.” He adds “the body of Jesus was created from the actual water of Mary and the notional water [seed] of Gabriel inherent in the moisture of blowing, since breath from the vital body is moist owing to the element of water in it” (175-176). In sections below, I discuss the significance of Mary, but the relationship of water for Bawa may be far more significantly married to Mary, as alluded to by Sufi thinkers like Ibn ‘Arabi. The metaphysical teachings of water by Bawa would be a worthy endeavor for this precise reason, especially in future studies of his discourses, but it also becomes a metaphor for Bawa’s own purpose and ministry.<sup>297</sup>

It is the proximity of Mankumban to Mary that is repeatedly used to explain it as a significant space by disciples and devotees of Bawa. Sarah, a senior member of the Fellowship in Philadelphia, visited Mankumban and expressed her understanding of this space:

And at that time, now they’ve actually made Mankumban into a *mazar* for Maryam and for Bawa. They consider it as sort of a joint *mazar* because that area is a place where, according to one of Bawa’s children there, I think Engineer Thambi told me this, Bawa had actually laid down in this place where they had designated for him to be buried and kind of went into another realm. Like they thought he was really gone but he wasn’t really. So they feel that there is that something Bawa put there of himself, there. And then that mosque is designated to Maryam. So but I think that you know he calls it “God’s House” and so to me Mankumban really represents that place of pure prayer that exists within the heart, you know, in connection with God. And it’s not really a designated religion to that. And I think Mankumban really sort of represents that, you know, purity of that place of prayer that Bawa

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<sup>297</sup> This discussion of water is discussed further in relation to this discourse in Chapter 9’s subsection *The Pond: A Letter to the Fellowship Family from Bawa* in Chapter 9.

brought and revived within us and I know that so when I went there, I've been there two times over the last few years.<sup>298</sup>

Some disciples of Bawa understand that Maryam is buried there, as there is a tomb that is the central focus of Mankumban. Others also clarified that Bawa wanted to be buried here and had in fact lain in the grave. He became unconscious while in the grave and when he finally awoke, he confirmed that this was the place for him. Many of the disciples in Sri Lanka, and now America, Canada and Saudi Arabia, understand this to be a sacred shrine dedicated to Maryam and a place of intimate proximity to Bawa, while for the local disciples it is also revered as a memorial for Bawa.<sup>299</sup> I frequently asked members in Jaffna, but also Bawa's global devotees, about the importance of Mankumban, and the responses I received always varied both in terms of purpose and its significance. In terms of its ritual consequence it also serves as a *palli*, or prayer house, for the immediate community, both for the Muslims and the Hindu devotees of Bawa. The classification of Mankumban as a *palli* by the local Hindu devotees is noteworthy, because *palli* in local Tamil parlance refers to a mosque, while the American disciples of Bawa often call it "God's House." Consequently the varying visitors, devotees and pilgrims designate different

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<sup>298</sup> Interview with the author, classroom at the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. April 2, 2014.

<sup>299</sup> There are varying traditions of what happened to Mary after the death of Jesus. The Catholic and Orthodox Christian traditions hold that she ascended into heaven, where she rules as the Queen of Heaven and serves as an intercessor to all those who faithfully appeal to her. This forms a central theological tenet in Catholicism, where most Protestant traditions do not ascribe her much agency, as it interferes with Protestant theological focus on scripture and faith as the most significant focus in achieving salvation. Catholic and Orthodox traditions ascribe many sacred spaces to her, one significant one is Ephesus near Izmir in Turkey, where Mary is reputedly said to have lived out the rest of her days, as John took her there for safety and refuge. Shrines to Mary are a common feature in Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim traditions, where individuals invoke her intercession, such examples include Our Lady of Zeiton a Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt or the Church of the Tomb of the Virgin Mary in the Garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem. Christians and Muslim visit these sites dedicated to Mary. Some Muslims traditions hold that Mary's grave is located at the foot of Mount Olives, near the old city of Jerusalem. For more on Mary please see this Chapter 8's subsection *The Matron and Maryam: Women in Bawa's Ashram and Mankumban*.

descriptors to this sacred place of veneration. Still, the connection to Maryam and Bawa is without question, the common denominator in all the varying narratives that were relayed to me.

For instance, Rizin Salih, a senior disciple of Bawa who met him when he was in Colombo, currently works in Saudi Arabia. He travels regularly to Sri Lanka and Philadelphia and Toronto to visit the Fellowship. He explained to me that Bawa informed his children that Maryam ended up near Velanai Island, when she was attempting to run away from the verbal persecution against her after the death of Jesus. So Bawa offered her shelter and promised to build her a home when he was able. The building of Mankumban was then a fulfillment of this promise that Bawa made to Maryam.

The president of the Serendib Sufi Study Circle (SSSC) Hilmi gave a similar explanation to me.<sup>300</sup> According to Hilmi, Maryam was suffering ridicule in her own land (Rome) because people were referring to her as the “Mother of God.” So she left her home and came to northern Sri Lanka, where she encountered Bawa. Bawa offered her protection and shelter. When Hilmi spoke of this narrative, he explained that it was not the physical Bawa (the form experienced by the Fellowship members), rather it was the essence of Bawa, referring to a timeless *Qutb* that Bawa represented, who provided shelter for Maryam.<sup>301</sup> To keep the promise Bawa (in a different manifestation) made to Maryam, he built her a shrine.

Engineer Thambi, who is one of the senior Tamil students in Jaffna, gave the most detailed account of the connection between Maryam and Bawa, one that Sarah repeated in her

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<sup>300</sup> A Hilmy. Mohideen is the current President of the Serendib Sufi Study Circle. He has played a critical role in translating, interpreting and publishing Bawa’s discourses from Tamil into English in volumes called the *Wisdom of the Divine (Al-Hikmathul Jannath)* starting in the mid-1970s, with the arrival on American disciples who wished to access Bawa’s teachings in English. Hilmy currently leads Sunday morning meetings in Colombo and with growing health concerns, he plays a less active role in Colombo and it will be interesting to see who takes his leadership role.

<sup>301</sup> For more on this discussion of the timeless *Qutb* and Bawa please see Chapter 7’s subsection *From Swami to Qutb: the Many Titles of Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen*.

comments above as well.<sup>302</sup> He said that Maryam was chased away from her own land, similar to what was relayed by Salih and Hilmi above. People were saying things about her; especially that she had produced a child out of wedlock. So she left and sought refuge elsewhere. Hence she came here to Velanai Island. She was eventually buried here years ago but Bawa wanted to build her a shrine in her honour. When building this shrine for her, Bawa laid the foundation. He also dug the grave and lay in the grave for ten minutes. At which time he had fallen unconscious. When Bawa eventually awoke from his “sleep,” he reportedly exclaimed, “This is a good place.” So many consider it as Bawa’s spiritual grave while simultaneously being Maryam’s spiritual tomb.

The notion that sacred spaces associated with Bawa have retained something of his “presence” has been consistently affirmed from Pennsylvania to Jaffna, especially his personal items, such as his bed. But it is in Mankumban where it is fully solidified and focused through a tomb, which honours his presence but also Maryam. It is not that the tomb contains either physical bodies of these figures (Bawa or Maryam) it is enough that these spaces have something of their “presence” through association or promixity (even if it is in another time period) (Schopen 1987; Schomberg 2003).<sup>303</sup> Because of this presence the whole complex of Mankumban is said to be hallowed ground. Numerous devotees expressed to me that angels and *jinns* (spirits) visit and pray at the *masjid* at nighttime, while others explained that any prayers requested here would be granted. Some of the local devotees expressed that Maryam dwells in this space and has appeared as a beautiful woman to sincere seekers.

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<sup>302</sup> For more biographical details on Engineer Thambi please see Chapter 5 discussion of the *ashram*.

<sup>303</sup> This belief of presence of holy figures in sites associated with them is common across religious traditions, one can find this in historical spaces associated with Jesus or Muhammad, and it is also noted in Buddhism, especially for instance with Shingon Buddhism and the remarkable cemetery at Mount Koyasan. For an interesting analysis of the idea of residual presence of Buddha and development of stupas, with varying burial deposits as centers of shrines, as basis to explore burial practices in religions, please see “Burial ‘*Ad Sanctos*’ and the Physical Presence of the Buddha in Early Indian Buddhism: A Study in the Archaeology of Religions” by Gregory Schopen (1987).

Ahamed Kabir, another senior student of Bawa, also shared the idea of experiencing visions of Mary at Mankumban. When Bawa and Kabir were in Sri Lanka, Bawa told Kabir to spend the night at Mankumban. So Kabir went and slept in the main sanctuary. That night he saw a vision of a woman. At first he was horrified and thought that perhaps it was an evil spirit. But the figure slowly walked towards him and gently touched his forehead. Startled, Kabir stayed awake all night as he was too frightened to sleep but he could not return to the *ashram* because Bawa told him that he must spend the full night. The next morning he took the earliest bus back to Jaffna and rushed into the *ashram*. He found Bawa sitting on his bed tending to business. When Bawa saw Kabir, he asked what happened. Kabir struggled to put sentences together but he explained to Bawa that at Mankumban he had a vision of a lady, clarifying what she was wearing (white gown) and her height (she was very tall as Kabir is also very tall). Bawa started to laugh. Kabir was genuinely frustrated. Then Bawa explained to Kabir that it was Maryam who he had seen. Bawa added that he was now prepared to complete the work that he was set to do for Bawa. Kabir understood this as his work of producing *duas* and healing people work that Bawa was training him to complete.<sup>304</sup>

### *The Sub-Spaces of Mankumban Complex*

The gated complex that includes Mankumban consists of several sub-spaces. There is a two-story building that was added after the passing of Bawa to serve as accommodation for those who want to visit and spend nights at Mankumban. This is mainly for students of Bawa from abroad.<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>304</sup> Interview with author, Bawa's room in the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. April 16, 2014.

<sup>305</sup> When I stayed at Mankumban for a few nights with Roshan, an Executive Member of the Toronto Branch who was on a pilgrimage to Jaffna, we stayed in one of these rooms. It contains two single beds and a bathroom. On the top floor there is also an open hall area for meetings and gatherings, intended for when disciples visit from America.

There is also an outdoor cooking area and pavilion, with an indoor wood kitchen, similar to what was described in the *ashram*. Cooking and serving food are crucial to events that take place at Mankumban and were part of Bawa's larger ministry. There is also a smaller complex that consists of an open hall in which people are served food after *jum'ah* services on Friday and for special celebrations, such as *mawlid*s. Everyone is served a meal on the floor on top of a banana leaf (as is custom locally). At the end of the hall is a room, which contains Bawa's resting chair, along with other personal items. This small room functions as an ancillary shrine analogous to shrines of Bawa seen from Philadelphia, Colombo and Jaffna. Unlike other ancillary shrines associated with Bawa, this particular room contains a chair and not a bed.

Attached to the same complex is the imam's residence. The SSSC Colombo committee, which maintains legal authority of this property, has appointed him as the prayer leader for Mankumban. He performs five times prayers and keeps Islamic *adab* (conduct), but on a regular basis it is he alone who performs these prayers, as many of the local Hindus devotees do not perform *salat*. The imam is a strikingly tall and clean-shaven man. He wore long white tunic, white pants and a white *kufi* (brimless cap) and he had a white shawl draped over his shoulders. When I met him the first time, he informed me that Mankumban was beyond any particular religious tradition. However, overtime I found that he was often uncomfortable during daily and weekly prayers when the focus of the activities was not five times prayers, but devotion to the shrine that forms the center of this sacred space.

Right outside the *palli* is a flagpole with a green flag. Adjacent to it is the well, from which those entering the *palli* perform ablutions or clean their hands and feet. The imam explained to me that he usually opens the space just before prayer times so that the female devotees, who live in the nearby village, can ready the space. This consists of getting the oil

lamp checked and making sure the space is tidy. Like the *ashram*, the large open hall inside this *masjid-mazar* complex contained an oil-lamp near the inner sanctuary. The oil-lamp's top was designed with a crescent moon and was contained within a glass enclosure. There was also a holder for incense sticks near the oil-lamp. Behind the glass enclosure were three locked smaller rooms. The imam claimed the room to the left, as he used it for his prayers (*salat*). Some of the items in this room included his prayer books, *tasbih* (prayer beads), holy water sprinkler, and a shelf in the far right corner, a tall fan and some audio-equipment. The room on the far right was a storage room. It was also used for preparation and sorting of food items on days of rituals. For instance, during the times that we had to prepare for *jum'ah* prayers, I sat in this room with the other female devotees and helped set biscuits on trays or cut fruit in this room, which would then



Figure 6.2: The tomb in the inner sanctuary of Mankumban. It is the focus of ritual activity and devotion by the religiously diverse adherents who utilize this space. The narratives vary in terms of the exact nature of this tomb, but it is meant to honor Bawa, and Bawa dedicated it for Maryam. Photograph taken by author, August 2013.



be placed before the tomb prior to the commencement of prayers.

The center room is the main sanctuary. It contains a large elevated tomb for Maryam and it is also the grave that Bawa laid in, as explained by Engineer Thambi above. It had a green-suede *chaddor* (cloth) with gold embroidery with a red and gold border (Figure 6.2). This tomb is under a wooden engraved canopy with four poles and took up most of the room. There was just enough space for the tomb. In this main sanctuary was also another oil lamp. In front of the tomb was a Qur'an-holder with a Qur'an and some Fellowship newsletters from Philadelphia. Those who do come for private devotion to Mankumban come to the front of this room and usually fully prostrate and touch their forehead to the ground in front of the tomb. They also light incense sticks and circumambulate the tomb in the inner sanctuary. Just as I have done with the other spaces we have encountered, below I describe in more detail some of the ritual activities that unfold at Mankumban, starting with *jum'ah* prayers.<sup>306</sup>

#### *Poosai and Jum'ah in Mankumban*

On the Friday I was present for *jum'ah* service in August 2013, it was only the imam and Roshan, who was visiting from Toronto, Canada, who participated in *jum'ah* prayers and performed the *salat* (Islamic prayer) in the imam's small prayer room. The rest who had gathered on this day sat and waited in the main hall of Mankumban. Notably for a service that was given the name "*jum'ah*" and took place on Friday afternoon, there was no *khutbah* (sermon) or communal performance of *salat*. Rather the locals from the nearby village and those visiting Chaddy Beach, a popular tourist attraction, composed the estimated fifty-sixty people who came

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<sup>306</sup> The paved path from the main *masjid-mazar* complex leads to the gates looking out directly to Chaddy Beach. It is also adjacent to the military base that belongs to the Sri Lankan army. During the times that I was at Mankumban, I often noticed an army man on guard upon his watchtower peering into the complex, especially if activities were taking place.

for afternoon prayers and awaited the completion of *salat* by the imam and Roshan, so they could begin their portion of liturgy or what is sometimes referred to as *poosai* (*puja* or prayer).<sup>307</sup> Tamil devotees refer to the prayers at Mankumban and the *ashram* as *poosai* (*puja*).<sup>308</sup> Some of the same devotees come to Mankumban to partake in the services, though some families remain behind at the *ashram* to care for it. A similar recording of Bawa reciting the *Surah al Fatiha* was played and *salawat* to the Prophet Muhammad and *Engal Bawa* was sung. The service also consists of ritual that was not noted in the *ashram* or in Philadelphia for that matter, in which



Figure 6.3: In this photograph, food is being served by devotees of Bawa to those who attended Friday prayers at Mankumban. This vegetarian meal, which included brown rice, fried eggplant curry, *dhal* (lentil) curry is served on banana leaves, as is custom locally, on the floor. These are food items that you see cooked in Philadelphia by American disciples, as they are associated with Bawa but they are in fact the local Jaffna cuisine. Photograph taken by author, August 2013.

<sup>307</sup> *Puja*, from the Sanskrit to honour and pay homage, is a tradition that is celebrated by Hindus, Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs in the South Asian regions through a series of ritual acts to commemorate a deity or the divine. It can be done individually at one's home, or in a temple communally. *Poosai* or prayer is the Tamil equivalent. The Tamil Hindus, for instance, may use this word to refer to the Hindu prayers in the temple, while Tamil Christians may use this to refer to prayer liturgies at church. This tradition is usually not associated with a Muslim community.

<sup>308</sup> For more on these similar rituals, see subsection on *Ritual Activities and Personal Piety in Bawa's Ashram* in Chapter 5.

incense sticks were lit. Some of those present, not all, walked with the lit incense sticks circumambulating the inner sanctuary with the tomb, Bawa's room (in the separate complex adjacent to the shrine) making sure to wave the incense stick near Bawa's items (i.e., beds, chairs), and finally the flagpole (*koti*) outside Mankumban, where those participating placed the incense sticks into the ground at the base of the flagpole. Only Engineer Thambi and another male devotee were in the inner sanctuary of Mankumban during the ritual. Everyone else, including the matron of the *ashram*, remained in the large hall. The matron stood in front of all the devotees leading the recitations, as men and women sat separately side by side. During the services most of the males did not sing, except one man who stood up the whole time with his hands held out and his head wrapped. The women, mostly the Hindu women who helped with the cooking and the regular devotees that I have noticed throughout my time at the *ashram* and Mankumban, participated in all the recitations.

I also observed that the Muslim women only sang the *salawat*. They had their hair loosely covered, while another Hindu female devotee, who prepared food for Roshan and myself while we stayed at Mankumban, also had her hair covered. These practices of covering and dressing were fluidly maintained. Most often I remained unveiled and I was not asked to cover as a necessity by anyone. The practice of veiling at the *masjid* in Philadelphia is adhered to strictly. Separate entrances for females and males were observed, while signs in the women's entrance listed detailed instructions of veiling (i.e., what needed to be covered) and appropriate attire prior to entering the *masjid* for prayers. There were no such rules posted at this *masjid-mazar* complex. And where most *masjids* in the local region do not permit women to enter at all, here at Mankumban, females had equal access to the space. In fact they were at the forefront of preparing for the service and the matron even stood at the front leading the service. In addition to

Hindus and Muslims, there were a couple of Christian devotees of Bawa, who were in attendance, along with a few restless children from the local village, waiting for the food to be distributed.

Once the main *poosai* was completed, food was served on banana leaves on the ground to all visitors in a separate hall. Women and men from both the *ashram* and the devotees who lived in the local village prepared the food. All the males were served first in the food hall and then all the females were served, as seen in Figure 6.3. The order serving meals to the males first is likely a cultural practice and not a religious one. Small bags, which contained fruits, cookies and sweets, were also handed out as *prasad* (blessed food) to take home.<sup>309</sup> The elders of the community informed me that this practice of Friday prayers began after the war had ended in the region and did Bawa institute not a practice. It was a means to reinvigorate the centers of Bawa so that the army and other locals would not attempt to squat on the property. In Jaffna both the *ashram* and Mankumban, have seen a revival in activity and attendance in a post-war context, one that is also being helped by the arrival of pilgrims from America.<sup>310</sup> This leads to the transformations of practices out of necessity and political realities, but also the continuation of rituals, such as the *mawlid*s (celebrations) for the Prophet Muhammad and the *Qutb* (i.e., Bawa and Jilani), which are held at the *ashram* and Mankumban.

The imam did not participate in these events on the day I was present for *jum'ah* in August of 2013. When he completed his *salat* he left to retire to his room. Later when I saw him

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<sup>309</sup> *Prasad* can be in the form of food, flowers or gift packets (at the *ashram* and Mankumban it is usually in the form of food packets) that are given to the deity (or Bawa in this case) during *puja/poosai* and then returned to the worshippers as *prasad*, which then contains the blessings of the deity who has taken the offering. For more on *prasad* and Hindu practices please see *Everyday Hinduism* (2015) by Joyce Flueckiger and also see Andrea Pinkey's (2013) "Prasada, the Gracious Gift, in Contemporary Classical South Asia" in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, 3: 734-456.

<sup>310</sup> These pilgrimages are discussed further below in this chapter's subsection *Pilgrimages to Bawa's Spaces in Sri Lanka by the Members of the Fellowship*.

while I was eating he informed me that he was uncertain about much of the rituals taking place at Mankumban, explaining that they were not Islamic in nature. He even informed me that the nearby mosque, which itself was a *masjid-mazar* complex, whose *khutbah* you could hear blaring on the sound system during prayers at Mankumban, had complained about the “heretical” practices that were taking place here. These sentiments from some local Muslims about the predominant presence of Hindus and the ritualistic practices, such as the lighting of the incense and circumambulations, left the imam feeling unsettled as he felt that this was not Islam. These internal tensions, between the imam, the institutional leader of the Mankumban and the rituals led by leaders of ancillary spaces, such as the matron of the *ashram* and Engineer Thambi, illustrate again the vast interpretative legacies of the teachings of Bawa. The imam, the matron and Engineer Thambi are all senior students of Bawa. As such, the imam’s comments point to the ongoing negotiations of what constitutes authentic Islam and its relationship to Hinduism as experienced through Bawa. The ritual enactments of the lay devotees, who are at the forefront of devotion to Bawa, signals to a different but active lived reality of Sufism and Hinduism at Mankumban. Was this not what was noted in Philadelphia at the Fellowship Headquarters amongst Bawa’s North American students? Disciples of Bawa from Pennsylvania to Jaffna are living and negotiating distinctive understandings of Bawa’s teachings, but at the heart of all rituals, devotions and actions is Bawa. Be it Sufism, Islam, Hinduism or universal spirituality- from Pennsylvania to Jaffna, Bawa and his teachings stand as the common factor in how disciples articulate their identity (in relation to Bawa) and how they live and perform their belief (in relation to Bawa).

Whereas the imam only partially participated in these activities that took place on Friday, those who spent their entire day preparing for this event consider themselves devotees of Bawa.

Here again, like in the spaces illustrated in Pennsylvania one finds members negotiating how to practice and live the teachings of Bawa. Where the imam, who is a senior student of Bawa identifies with Islamic practices (i.e., praying five times a day), for the Hindu devotees, such as those who cooked all morning, such is not the case. For both the imam and the devotees, however, it is their faith (*nambikai*) in Bawa that drives their participation, regardless of its different manifestation. For instance, the matron of the *ashram*, Engineer Thambi and the other devotees who prepare the full vegetarian meal, live in Jaffna and come to Mankumban to spend the entire morning preparing and leading the activities. They serve the religiously diverse visitors, some of who do not even know who Bawa is. Nevertheless, they come to share in the *baraka* (grace or blessing) of the sacred place. The visitors range in social classes (low, middle and rich), gender (men and women) and religions (Hindus, Muslims and Christians). There were more Muslim women than men present. The presence of women in this space is important to highlight, as women are usually not permitted to enter mosques in this region. Overall there were equal numbers of men to women. The free meal also means that many come to receive much needed food, especially young children, who struggle to sit still during prayers. Therefore, similarly to Bawa's *masjid* and *mazar* in Pennsylvania, Mankumban has multiple purposes, all of which co-exist with each other.

During *jum'ah*, Roshan, an Executive Member of the Toronto Branch who was visiting Bawa's spaces in the north, explained how amazed she was to see the diversity of the participants partaking in this Friday afternoon prayer. There were Christians, Muslims and Hindus. In Philadelphia during Friday *jum'ah* prayers at the *masjid*, one does not experience this level of religious diversity. Though I highlighted religious and ethnic variety in the attendance at the *mawlid*s, *urs* and discourse meetings at the Fellowship, this was not necessarily the case with

Friday prayers in the *masjid*, which was practiced particularly by Muslim members of the Fellowship and Muslim members of the larger neighbourhood. In Mankumban, a unique manifestation of diversity at *jum‘ah* prayers is apparent, though what is called *jum‘ah* differs in structure to Philadelphia.

Still, for the first time it can be said that the Fellowship community in Philadelphia has experienced a “process of Islamization” that is not necessarily shared in Bawa’s Jaffna sites. What many may associate with “orthodox” Islam is far more representative of what I described of the Fellowship in Philadelphia, be it in the keeping of daily prayers, the fasting or even in dress and attire by males and females. Despite Philadelphia being more “Islamic”, the diversity described in the spaces in Section I is visible in the *ashram* and Mankumban. Diversity and pluralism of the Fellowship is not a distinctive mark of its American context. These processes of co-existences are evident in Mankumban, Bawa’s first sacred space, one that precedes the North American community. The *poosai* is only one ritual held at Mankumban. For instance, just as *iftar* is kept in Philadelphia and in the *ashram*, the same practice is also observed at Mankumban.

### *Breaking Fast at Mankumban*

Another ritual that I encountered during my fieldwork at Mankumban is breaking the fast or *iftar*. As similarly documented in Chapter 5 at the *ashram*, it is also replicated with local members at Mankumban. I use portions of field notes to describe what I observed during this particular ceremony:

Today it was the imam and another devotee who were leading the ritual, and aside from these two males, no one else was identifiably Muslim, but were all Tamil Hindus and what is

more there were all females as well (ten females in total). The females loosely wrapped their hair with a headscarf, which they picked up from the storage room. In the prayer hall of Mankumban, facing the sanctuary all of the women stood on the right side and the one male stood on the left. The imam sat on the floor on a mat with a book and he started the prayers, while the other male devotee took care the oil lamp and the incense pot. Into the fire pot he sprinkled three dashes of grey incense powder and everyone present did the same when it was their turn, again similar to what takes place at the *ashram*. After putting incense in the pot, they fanned their hands over the pot and cupped the smoke onto their faces. Then they lit incense sticks using the fire wick from the oil lamp and went into the inner chambers of the shrine and walked around it waving the incense stick in the air and walked through to the side room putting a couple of the incense sticks into the pot and walked outside to the flag pole. The smoky incense pot, which was inside the shrine, was now moved to the flagpole and everyone took turns putting three sprinkles of incense powder into the pot. Again they cupped the smoke to their faces. The imam remained inside the meditation hall the whole time and was continuing his own prayers and did not participate in any of the activities that involved the locals. This was a pattern that I noticed throughout my stay at Mankumban.

In my field notes I go on to describe further what the devotees did during the actual ritual:

The devotees, then, circumambulated the flagpole and touched their foreheads to the bottom of the flagpole and stuck some of the incense sticks into the ground around the pole. They took the fire pot to the room with Bawa's items in the adjacent building, which is separate from God's House. This open two-room house was painted green outside and contained the



*asma ul-husna* (ninety-nine names of Allah) painted on the wall near the entrance. They walked through the doors; some touched the chair that held Bawa's slippers and his clothes. Then they walked behind to the room, and in this room was chair that formerly belonged to Bawa and on the walls were pictures of Bawa and another oil lamp. And again the fire pot was placed on the floor and every one sprinkled the incense powder three times into the pot. And then they walked over to a small mount outside in the courtyard. I later asked what was special about the mount and I was told that it was the first spot dug up by Bawa. When Bawa did this, he explained to those present that this is the land where Mankumban would be build and it has remained this way. Then everyone walked back to God's House and rejoined the imam. At this point the singing of *Engal Bawa* took place followed by the recitation of the *salawat* to the Prophet Muhammad.

There are particular trends that are recurring. For instance, as I observed in the above section with the Friday prayers, the imam himself did not participate in the rituals, particularly those that involved the circumambulations of the tomb and Bawa's personal items, or that of lighting incense. Where these moments of selective adherence to communal rituals are notable, from Pennsylvania to Jaffna a significant consistent ritual remains the singing of the *salawat* to the Prophet Muhammad. This practice of reciting the *salawat* is completed at the end of all prayers and meetings in Philadelphia at the Fellowship house or at the *mazar* in Coatesville. The same is true at the *ashram* and at Mankumban. The recitation of the *tasliya*, or the blessing upon the Prophet Muhammad, is a meaningful form of piety prominent amongst Sufi communities.<sup>311</sup> This tradition of evoking blessings to the Prophet Muhammad can be traced from Jaffna to

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<sup>311</sup> For a discussion of the *tasliya* and *mawlid*s please see Chapter 2's subsection *Piety and Devotions at the Fellowship*.

Philadelphia, and to all the branches of the Fellowship and the Circle that form this transnational community. Bawa in all of his spaces consciously instituted devotion to the Prophet Muhammad. Another practice at Mankumban that was also observed at the *ashram* is the singing of *Engal Bawa*, as central to daily ritual. In Philadelphia, the singing of *Engal Bawa* during *urs* ceremony or death anniversary celebrations was evident, but it was not a part of daily ritual as it is in Jaffna. In tracing devotion to Bawa from Pennsylvania to Jaffna it is the *salawat* to the Prophet Muhammad that is consistently adhered to by all his diverse followers, while the singing in honour of Bawa forms the second most common inclination, one that is maintained more through daily ritual in Jaffna than in North America.

After the completion of the *salawat* to the Prophet Muhammad during *iftar* at Mankumban, dates, which were donated from a disciple from Saudi Arabia, were handed out to everyone who was present to break fast. Then those gathered walked over to the pavilion near the outdoor kitchen where *kanji* was served. The serving of *kanji* at Mankumban is similar to the practice of serving *kanji* at the *ashram*, a practice that is also found in Philadelphia where this dish is cooked for breakfast once a week or during Ramadan. I was informed that the cooking of *kanji* is only practiced both at the *ashram* and Mankumban during Ramadan, otherwise any cooking that takes place is only on Friday at lunch time for *jum'ah* where those from Jaffna come to Mankumban to participate in a meal.

Female disciples of Bawa who live near Mankumban prepared the *kanji* for *iftar*. The large cauldron of *kanji* was placed in front of the shrine in God's House, as an offering first, just as it was taken to smaller ancillary shrine in front of the altar for Bawa at the *ashram*. In both instances, the cooked *kanji* is first presented as an offering to Bawa prior to its distribution. In this regard, one can equate its similarity to practices of partaking in *prasad* (blessed food) at

Hindu temples in the region that many of the Hindu devotees are familiar with. Then the cauldron was taken back to the pavilion and served to everyone present. They served the *kanji* in the traditional way, in a pleated king coconut leaf that is made into a bowl. Meals are also served during *mawlid*s for the Prophet Muhammad and *Qutb* Abdul Qadir Jilani.

### **Faith and Piety: the Legacies of Bawa and His Communities in Post-War Jaffna**

At both Mankumban and the *ashram* those who led prayers are senior disciples of Bawa. Many who attend prayers have known Bawa throughout the generation of their families, a trend that is also evident in the Fellowship in Philadelphia.<sup>312</sup> Of the devotees that are attending now, their grandparents or parents were healed by Bawa or were students of Bawa when he was alive. So it is they who attend regularly and maintain active devotion to their guru, especially as they help with preparation for *jum'ah/poosai* and *iftar*, and other events such as *mawlid*s that take place regularly. The narratives of some of these members who form the Jaffna communities differ noticeably from the North American community. In spite of major differences in terms of cultural and political experiences of Sri Lanka, there are still similar struggles as they relates to questions of authenticity (i.e., what is Islam? what is Sufism) as they unfold in north. Even among the immediate leaders in the north there are certain disagreements regarding interpretations and performances of ritual activity, as illustrated above.

In northern Sri Lanka, unlike in Philadelphia and in the other branches of Bawa's communities (even Colombo), Bawa's discourses are not the center of everyday ritual activity. Bawa remains the key figure of veneration, as is evident in the reverence and attention that his personal items (i.e., bed, shoes etc.) receive in devotee's personal acts of piety but also during

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<sup>312</sup> The role of the next generation members of the Fellowship in North America is further discussed in Chapter 9's subsection *Negotiating Future Visions of the Fellowship*.

communal rituals. Ritual activity, however, is not necessarily orientated towards his discourses as it is in Philadelphia. It is still directed and guided by him, as it is Bawa's recorded recitations of the *Surah al-Fatiha* and *Surah al-Ikhlās* that is played and forms the core of the ritual activity itself. Bawa in some senses continues to be the prayer leader because it is his recorded prayers that are employed in daily rituals. The singing of the *salawat* to the Prophet Muhammad signals the end of the ritual, but there is no completion of *salat* or any other prayers in Arabic, at least during *jum'ah* or *iftar* prayers. This is in keeping with what Bawa did during his tenure, as highlighted in Mauroof's study (1976).

Hindu devotees of Bawa understand that he is a "god-like" figure. Many regularly shied away from asserting that he was god. For many of the Hindu devotees, their survival of years of war and experience of trauma and poverty is attributed to their devotion to Bawa. This forms a consistent narrative amongst Bawa's Jaffna followers, a reality that one does not hear in the stories of the students in Philadelphia. For instance, when I was helping Nayani,<sup>313</sup> a young girl who occasionally assists in the preparation of *jum'ah/poosai* at Mankumban, she shared her basis for devotion to Bawa.

We were sitting in the small room beside the inner sanctuary in Mankumban and I asked her how she heard about Bawa. As we sat there seeding pomegranates, she nonchalantly relayed that during the heights of the civil conflict in Jaffna, there was an incident when the army had come searching the area for Tamil males who might have been affiliated with the rebel movement (LTTE). She explained that this *palli* (Mankumban) was one of the spaces that many locals used to hide out for safety. One time during this search for

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<sup>313</sup> I have used a pseudonym for this devotee for the sake of her protection.

rebels, she and her family hid out in a very crowded Mankumban. She expressed that there were so many people, that individuals were piled up on top of each other, in an effort to hide from the incoming raid. The army eventually came into the mosque and took all the men and slaughtered them. Nayani lost some of her own male family members. Yet as she unearthed herself from the pile of bodies and regained some sense of the reality of the situation, she realized that she was still alive. It was at this moment that she started having faith (*nambikai*) in Bawa.

This story of Nayani captures a far different narrative of the immediate reality of Bawa's community in Jaffna. Where American followers of Bawa encountered their teacher, some within a climate that produced the luxury of spiritual experimentation and seeking, for individuals like Nayani, her coming to Bawa was dependent on her experience of violence and her survival, which she owed to the grace of Bawa. So she committed herself to this guru who protected her from death. Some members of the community were able to escape or find routes out of Jaffna during the turbulent periods of the civil war.

The matron of the *ashram* even explained that during the time of the Muslim expulsion in the 1990s, as the Tamil Tigers were forcibly expelling Muslims from the region and stripping them of their land titles, the *ashram* was also on the verge of being forced to be handed over to the militants, on the basis that it was Muslim property. Members of Bawa's community, especially those at the *ashram*, collected signatures from all of its members and brought them to the rebel leaders, explaining to them that they would not give over the land deeds or leave because they were not a Muslim community. They explained that the *ashram* was a place that was frequented by all people, including Christians and Hindus. Diversity of this small

community at a time of war saved it from falling into the hands of the rebel movement. And though the Muslims in the region were still expelled, the *ashram* remained unscathed.<sup>314</sup> These narratives only begin to capture the far more traumatic stories of the members who form this contingency of Bawa in Sri Lanka. Their survival, they understand, was granted because of Bawa's protection. It is this that forms a part of their understanding of Bawa as a figure with proximity to god.<sup>315</sup> For now these experiences of war and survival pave a radically dissimilar path of devotion for the followers of Bawa in spaces like the *ashram* and Mankumban.

These shared practices and spaces in South Asia are not out of the ordinary but are a regular feature of religiosity in South Asia. For example Mohammad (2013) captures how practices of visitation (*ziyarat* in Islam) and "divine sight" (*darsanam* in Hinduism) indicate the sharing of practices (5).<sup>316</sup> In his study he explains that this "combining" of "devotional traditions" of "local and localized manifestations of Islam, South Indian Hindu temple practices, devotion to Islamic holy persons, the idea of shared pilgrimage between Muslims and Hindus, and most interesting of all, a locally specific repertoire of blended Islamic and Hindu devotional practices" is really a component of religiosity as it emerges in South Asia (Mohammad 2013, 7). These are processes that are evident in communities amongst Bawa in Jaffna. Theories, such as those proposed by Richard Eaton (1996), suggested that Sufi saints proselytized in India, more recent studies offer that this was not representative of what likely unfolded. Kelly Pemberton

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<sup>314</sup> I introduced the expelled Muslim disciples of Bawa who were displaced in Puttalam camps in relation to the center in Colombo in Chapter 5. The displacement of Muslims from Jaffna was discussed in Chapter 4's subsection on *Sufism in Sri Lanka* and disciples of Bawa who live in the Puttalam camp also were discussed in Chapter 5's subsection on Bawa's Life at the *Ashram* and Mankumban.

<sup>315</sup> The idea of Bawa being god-like, amongst other titles given to him is further discussed in Chapter 7.

<sup>316</sup> In his case study on the village of Gugudu in Andhra Pradesh and the shared celebration of Muharram by Shi'i communities and Hindu devotees based on a unique local tradition of the *pir* Kullayappa, Mohammad found that his devotees also referred to this "total surrender to the *pir*" as "prapatti or *iman*" or in Tamil as *nambikai* through "*bhakti* and *ibadat*" (Mohammad 2013, 102). These sentiments formed "ritual and oral narratives" (2013, 143), a similarity that I am noting in my own study. For more on Mohammad see Chapter 4.

writes that “most Sufi saints in the subcontinent did not actively try to convert people,” but rather co-existed with other religions (10). An example is often cited of the Shaykh Nizam ud-din Auliya (d. 1325),<sup>317</sup> who did not encourage his Christian, Sikh and Hindu followers to convert to Islam (Pemberton 2004, 9-10). Bawa’s followers who are predominantly Hindus in Sri Lanka follow a similar tendency of non-conversion and so are indicative of a larger trend in which conversion to Islam was a not always a necessity by Sufi leaders in South Asia.

Dominique-Sila Khan (2004)<sup>318</sup> investigates similar inclinations surrounding shared spaces between Muslims and Hindus among the Ismaili traditions in South Asia. She develops the metaphor of “threshold” or the place of beginning that is also a feature of an entrance to a door. She writes:

Syncretic and liminal traditions or communities can be perceived as cohesive forces in the social fabric, powerful links in the uninterrupted chain of religious traditions. But as they tend to disappear as modern society shapes itself more along more monolithic criteria, the open doorways between communities are gradually closed and replaced here and there by boundary walls that rise higher and higher every day. Groups endowed with a composite religious identity are threatened and often obliged to make a drastic choice. The landscape of South Asia and the fate of its inhabitants may have been different if history had not forced so many people to “cross the threshold” (2004, 6-7).

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<sup>317</sup> Shaykh Nizam ud-din Auliya (d. 1325) was a Chishti Sufi order, one of the main Sufi groups in South Asia. This group stressed love as a way to experience God, and centered on rituals of listening to music and poetry.

<sup>318</sup> Dominique-Sila Khan completed her PhD in literature and another in anthropology at Sorbonne University, Paris. She lives in Jaipur, India, where she is currently working as an independent researcher, associated with the Institute of Rajasthan Studies. She specializes in the study of Hindu-Muslim interactions in South Asia, particularly among the Nizari Ismailis in India. Her first publication was entitled, *Conversions and Shifting Identities: Ramdev Pir and the Ismailis in Rajasthan* (1997).

In her more recent analysis Khan (2010) further challenges these plural identities in the South Asian milieu, especially in relation to the sharing of spaces, rituals and *shaykhs* between Hindus and Muslims:

Can one be described or categorized as a Hindu and a Muslim at the same time? Again, this question makes sense only if we think in terms of separate and clear-cut categories; it is obvious that they do not at all disturb the devotees for whom they constitute a common phenomenon, albeit divine and supernatural is its orientation (58).

These boundaries or labels are transcended in everyday settings in the sacred spaces of South Asia. Khan writes that “[...] faith will certainly always remain a strictly personal matter that no material power can ultimately manipulate” and it is this that forms the basis of shared spaces and rituals amongst diverse religious followers (2010, 60).

It is the reality of “composite religious identity” noted at the *ashram* and Mankumban that challenges “modern societies” need to view the world through a “monolithic criteria.” These moments of interface bring forth “powerful links” and ways of being that suggest “cohesive” spaces and rituals that are of course not without negotiation. For instance, at Mankumban local Hindus commemorate Hindu religious holy days according to the Tamil calendar. During *Karthikai Deepam*, or the festival of the lights, small clay oil lamps are lit and used to decorate the home or temples in Tamil Hindu traditions.<sup>319</sup> It is these moments of embodied and negotiated religiosities that captures the complex ways of being Sufi, Hindu and

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<sup>319</sup> This event usually falls in the Tamil month of *Karttikai* (mid-November to mid-December) and takes place to coincide with the alignment of the moon with a series of auspicious constellations to signify Lord Murukan, whom Hindu followers of Bawa gave the title *Qutb* Murukan to Bawa. In December 2014, Bawa’s Hindu devotees decorated Mankumban for this festival.



Muslim, which can be further noted as pilgrims from North America also challenge these “composite religious identities.” The stability in the region has brought forth again the practice of North American pilgrims visiting Bawa’s homeland. Similar to the visits by Bawa’s American disciples when he was alive and in Sri Lanka, Bawa’s followers from across the globe, such as Canada, the United States, Saudi Arabia and England, have started to travel again to Sri Lanka to visit his *ashram* and Mankumban, to reaffirm their commitment to their Sufi *shaykh* resulting in the creation pilgrimages to the *ashram* and Mankumban.

### **Pilgrimages to Bawa’s Spaces in Sri Lanka by the Members of the Fellowship**

Since John Eade and Michael Sallnow (1991) suggested that shrines do not have inherent meanings but rather are sites upon which competing meanings are projected, scholars have begun to approach sites of pilgrimage in the language of contestation rather than in terms of Victor Turner’s collective feeling or *communitas* (1969).<sup>320</sup> Eade and Sallnow write:

The power of a shrine, therefore, derives in large part from its character almost as a religious void, a ritual space capable of accommodating diverse meanings and practices—though of course the shrine staff might attempt, with varying degrees of success to impose a single, official discourse. This, in final analysis, is what confers upon a major shrine its essential, universalistic character: its capacity to absorb and reflect a

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<sup>320</sup> Anthropological studies have heavily gleaned from Victor Turner’s theories of “*communitas*” and “*liminality*” in the study of ritual and pilgrimage studies. Collective experience and passage from mundane to the sacred through structure leads to the creation of collective experience, as proposed by Turner, has been challenged by pilgrimage studies in regions of the Middle East and the Mediterranean where “interconfessional” rituals and pilgrimages challenge the homogenous experience of *communitas*. For more discussion on this see the excellent collection of case studies in *Sharing Sacred Spaces in The Mediterranean: Christians, Muslims, and Jews at Shrines and Sanctuaries* edited by Dionigi Albera and Maria Couroucli (2012).

multiplicity of religious discourses, to be able to offer a variety of clients what each of them desires (Eade and Sallnow 1991, 15).

These “multiplicity of religious discourses” in pilgrimages and shrine cultures, a tendency captured by scholars who have studied Islam and Sufism in South Asia (Khan 2004, 2010; Mohammad 2013) is further affirmed in practices and pieties at Mankumban.

The *mazar* in Pennsylvania has become a site of pilgrimage in the North American landscape of Islam. Yet as pilgrims arrive at the threshold of Bawa’s resting place in Pennsylvania, there are *parallel pilgrimages* that are taking place to Bawa’s sacred sites in Sri Lanka. Devotees of Bawa, those who met him while he was alive and those who have joined his movement since his physical passing now make their own pilgrimage of return to Sri Lanka to visit the homeland of their spiritual teacher. It is these acts of pieties that I call *parallel pilgrimages*: parallel in relation to the journeys that are taking place in Coatesville, Pennsylvania. The varying circuits and movements that take place between the *mazar* and Mankumban is a unique facet of this community that further affirms the transnational network of affiliations of Bawa and his disciples.

Although I speak mainly of the pilgrimages of North Americans and those who live in Saudi Arabia (who are Sri Lankan Muslims) in the following sections, there have been instances of Muslims from Colombo and followers from Jaffna who have also visited Philadelphia. Some visit because they have family members who live in cities close to Philadelphia, and so they visit the Fellowship. The matron of the *ashram*, for instance, left during the heights of the war and was in Philadelphia. She eventually returned to take care of the *ashram*, which she felt was her responsibility given to her personally by Bawa. Others also visited Bawa when he died and went

to honor his grave in Coatesville. The movement of followers from Sri Lanka to North America is far less the norm due to financial restraints and because of the difficulty of acquiring visas. Those who are Sri Lankans residing in other countries, such as Saudi Arabia or England, annually or bi-annually visit between sacred sites associated with Bawa in Pennsylvania and Jaffna. These spiritual tours to Sri Lanka have increased with the end of the civil war and now with frequent and regular weekly activities and yearly festivals (i.e., *mawlid*, institutional anniversaries and *urs*) being commemorated again at the *ashram* and Mankumban, pilgrims from the United States, Canada, England and Saudi Arabia are aiding in this process through their presence.

Many members partake in individual trips to Sri Lanka. During these trips, they usually visit the *ashram* and Mankumban. Some even stay at the *ashram* and the lodging spaces that are available at Mankumban, while others regularly stay at nearby hotels. The aim of the visit is to reconnect with Bawa's spaces in Jaffna, primarily Mankumban. They serve as *khalwa*, or spiritual retreats, of sorts that allows them to take a break from their day-to-day life and immerse themselves in Bawa's Jaffna sites.<sup>321</sup> Sarah, a senior member of the Fellowship in Philadelphia, explained during our interview about her own trips to Mankumban and her experience of *jum'ah* prayers:

They have like designated areas, which I didn't know. So the men's area is in the front and then there is the *mazar* and then on the other side is this room that is really for women but I didn't know that. I just thought we were going to do prayer out in the main hall like you would in any mosque and he [imam] said "no, no my dear, that's not the way Bawa

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<sup>321</sup> This was the case at the *mazar* in Coatesville, discussed in Chapter 3.

designated this. Now I'm going to pray over here, you go over in that side with the women" and so I was really kind of surprised by that but I think that as far as the formal five time prayer goes its probably done like that. And women would pray separately in their own room and then I observed the *jum'ah* prayer there, which was very different. It was very different; it wasn't a traditional Islamic *jum'ah* at all. And they prepare the food for the people and you know but it's very beautiful and I feel like it really does like I said represent that sort of open space of prayer that Bawa you know represents. Even though it does, it had the Islamic flavour and the Hindu flavour both.<sup>322</sup>

Sarah's experience at Mankumban illustrates the spatial differentiation, both in relation to gender and rituals as it unfolds in this *masjid-mazar* complex. In relation to her own experience at the Fellowship in Philadelphia. For Sarah her place during *jum'ah* prayers needed to be adjusted as per instructions of the imam, while the *jum'ah* prayers that she observed were noticeably different. She explained these in terms of the "Islamic" and "Hindu" flavour of the Jaffna sites. However, her understanding of what she observed was premised on the acceptance that it was an "open space of prayer" or "God's House," which fulfilled the purpose according to Bawa's own instructions. Though she was quick to indicate that others who travelled to these spaces struggle with these "flavours" of ritual activity:

So if you were a Muslim going there expecting it to be like [...] you might find fault or you might not. I don't know. Some Muslims do go out there and maybe you know I think if they understand Bawa and they love Bawa then they know, you know, the value and the purity of

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<sup>322</sup>Interview with author, the Fellowship classroom, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 2, 2014.

what exists there. And they would just do their prayers and you know, and have that understanding but I think you know if there is a more fundamental sort of trend in Sri Lanka that they would probably find fault with that and they are trying to protect Mankumban from that actually.<sup>323</sup>

Sarah's comments underscore the internal dynamics of the followers of Bawa from both North America and Sri Lanka, and how they apprehend Mankumban, especially as it is associated with Islamic *adab* (conduct). For Sarah, even despite the diversity of the practices and devotees, she negotiates these propensities based on the personage of Bawa himself, who personified this diversity, though it has not been the case for everyone who visits these sites regularly.

The summer that I was completing my fieldwork in Sri Lanka, there was a group of Fellowship members who were participating in a pilgrimage to Sri Lanka. The group consisted of members of the Fellowship from various branches, such as Toronto, New York, while people were also travelling from Saudi Arabia and Colombo. Those who were travelling a longer distance made sure to visit tourist sites in Sri Lanka as part of their pilgrimage. Still their visit was centered on the places associated with Bawa. They visited the SSSC center in Colombo for their Sunday morning meetings and went to Jaffna for a few days to visit both the *ashram* and Mankumban. With the consent of those organizing this trip, I was allowed to participate in their pilgrimage to Jaffna and thus am able to provide details of this particular group as a means to understand some of the pilgrimage routes to Jaffna that forms the networks of Bawa's communities.

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<sup>323</sup> Interview with author, The Fellowship classroom, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 2014.

The pilgrims took a local flight from the Colombo army airport and flew into northern Sri Lanka, where a tour bus, organized by the matron of the *ashram* and Engineer Thambi, picked the group up outside the army airport in Jaffna.<sup>324</sup> This particular group consisted of about twenty members; some were families with young children, while others were travelling individually. Some of those on the trip travelled to Sri Lanka previously on a similar itinerary, while for others it was their first time. For this particular group every detail was planned from hotel arrangements, pre-arranged meals to tour buses to travel between the hotel to the *ashram* and Mankumban. The trip consisted of travelling together as a group and participating in activities mainly within the group. This often meant that pilgrims did not readily take part in ritual activity with the local devotees of the *ashram* and Mankumban. For instance, on the first day of visiting the *ashram*, the pilgrims were greeted with *salaams* and handshakes with locals who were at the *ashram*. Upon the immediate arrival at the *ashram* most of the pilgrims went directly to Bawa's rooms upstairs and spent time in private devotions; some running the *tasbeeh* (prayer beads) through their fingers, others embracing the bed of Bawa or even leaning against it for the entirety of their time there.

For instance, Ali was one of the pilgrims present during this trip. Ali's father came to the Fellowship through his connections to Bawa's senior disciple who resides in Saudi Arabia. They met each other in Toronto while Ali's father was visiting and eventually Ali's family was introduced to Bawa. This was Ali's first time travelling to Sri Lanka. I did not get a chance to speak with Ali during our travels as a group together, when we returned to Toronto, we reconnected and he shared with me his experiences, and even took some follow-up questions

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<sup>324</sup> These airbases remain in the control of the Sri Lankan army and though they were used for military purposes during the heights of the latter part of the civil war, now they are used mainly for tourist, international aid or humanitarian organizations.

after our first interview through email. When I asked him about his experience of travelling to Bawa's spaces in Jaffna, he explained:

The real experiences began as we headed to Mankumban and Jaffna. This was in the North of the country where we [*sic*] to see Bawa's first Fellowship. The area of Jaffna was where the heaviest and most brutal of the fighting occurred during the thirty years or so of Civil War. I'm speaking of bombed out buildings and bullet holes all over every building. You'll see whole swathes of land where buildings were completely erased with just a hint of their foundations left. It was in this area where we found Bawa's Fellowship. Untouched. This was a miracle in and upon itself as literally next door was a home that had been shelled and fired upon. It was blackened from fire and shrapnel. The green colour of Bawa's Fellowship stood in stark contrast to its surroundings. Inside, it was cool and refreshing which was also a difference from outside where the weather was hot and humid. Bawa's Fellowship was an amazing and beautiful place to see with one's eyes.<sup>325</sup>

In Ali's remarks the residue of war was a notable difference in his immediate surroundings that remained with him. These details of carnage further mystified the journey of returning to "Bawa's first Fellowship." Once he and the rest of his group arrived at the *ashram*, Ali continued to explain what he felt, and the actions leading to his own personal acts of devotions, especially once he made it to Bawa's room on the second floor of the *ashram*:

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<sup>325</sup> Follow up interview with author via email, Toronto, Canada. October 17, 2013.

It had a peacefulness that was astounding and a constant breeze blew through one of Bawa's rooms. The meals we had there were of a caliber above and beyond the vegetarian meals I've had at the Philly Fellowship. The members of the fellowship were amazingly sweet and generous. Always smiling and had a spark of happiness with whatever they did or say [*sic*]. I spent a good amount of my time sitting in Bawa's room giving my salaams and repeating the *dua* of: "Ya Baghdadiy Shaikh Sultan Faqir Muhaiyaddeen, Abdul-Qadiril-Jilani *radiyallahu 'anhu*" - "O' Baghdadi, King of Shaikhs, Pauper Muhaiyaddeen, slave of the Almighty, Abdul-Qadiril-Jilani, may Allah be pleased with him." I did not know why I repeated this as this is part of the morning *Dhikr* that I do, however, it felt right to be in that hallowed room with its light and giving my blessings and salaams to Bawa. Bawa is my Father, my Master, and my Shaikh. The Emerald jewel of my Heart and the Emerald light of my Eyes. He who pulled me out of the Fire, wrote upon my hands, and took me under his protection [...]. This is my mantra and my belief and my connection to Bawa and for this Dua to pop into my head was what felt right.<sup>326</sup>

For Ali his time in Bawa's room was climatic, one that set it apart from his experiences at the Fellowship in Philadelphia. He relayed this by not only stressing the "caliber" of the vegetarian food he consumed at the *ashram*, but also of the nature of the disciples of Bawa he met in the *ashram*. Yet, it was his time in Bawa's room that served as the superlative moment for him, when he recited portions of the morning *dhikr* completed by the Fellowship in North America. In doing so, he reaffirmed his relationship with Bawa, who was not only his master and *shaykh* but also the "Emerald jewel of my Heart and the Emerald light of my Eyes." For Ali, Bawa is the

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<sup>326</sup>Follow up interview with author via email, Toronto, Canada. October 17, 2013.



source of his continual guidance, and with his presence in this “hallowed ground” at the *ashram* of Bawa, this intimate relationship with Bawa was solidified. Such examples of personal devotion at the *ashram* by pilgrims capture the purpose and practice of visiting the *ashram*. Each individual set their own protocol in how they navigated the space, beyond the restriction of females who are on menses who are requested to avoid the space for “purity” purposes.

Once most of the pilgrims finished their personal veneration in Bawa’s room upstairs, they headed back onto the tour bus to Mankumban. On my way out with these Fellowship pilgrims, I noticed that it was time for daily prayers at the *ashram*. Those at the *ashram* laid extra mats on the floor in the main meditation hall where Bawa’s bed is ornamented and were standing waiting for the visitors to join them in the prayers at the *ashram*, but the pilgrims all rushed out without taking notice. During my time with this particular pilgrimage group, I observed that the two groups did not pray together. The pilgrims did not partake in the prayers that the locals practiced, a reminder of Eade and Sallnow’s (1991) understanding of pilgrimage sites as containing different meanings. This incident indicates again the parallel communities that are utilizing even the *ashram* in Jaffna, but also how groups, especially those who are coming from North America from a particular Muslim understanding of Bawa may not necessarily unite together in prayer. This group of mainly Muslim disciples of Bawa also did not communally pray *salat* together either, in the spaces of Bawa or elsewhere. They might have completed their required prayers on their own time.

Once the pilgrims arrived at Mankumban, the imam was waiting for their arrival. The pilgrims solemnly soaked in the pilgrimage experience, as Mankumban was the main site they longed to visit, due to its significance to both Bawa and its narratives of association to Mary. Upon entering the complex, the pilgrims went directly to the well outside the main building and

washed their feet and faces, while others drank it. Then, they took off their shoes and walked into “God’s House.” There the pilgrims again performed individual acts of piety and devotion in the inner sanctuary of the tomb. Everyone stood encircling the tomb, which was understood as a sacred tomb for Maryam. The imam led in the recitation of *Surah al-Fatiha* and the singing of the *salawat* to the Prophet Muhammad. Many of the pilgrims were emotional. Some wept in response to what they claimed was the state of being overwhelmed and for others it was due to the realization of an answered prayer to be able to visit this sacred space. They planned this journey and in some respects endured challenges by travelling to a land that they were not familiar with. Thus, arriving at the threshold at Mankumban was the pivotal moment that they had prepared for in earnest. The success of arriving heralded their answered prayers and the receiving of special graces for a journey fulfilled.

Most of those gathered bent down and kissed and hugged the tomb that was covered in green-gold embroidered *chaddor* (cloth). Some of the female pilgrims kissed it repeatedly on all ends, as they circumambulated the tomb, while hugging the pillars of the canopy that rose above the tomb. Ali, who himself was deeply in a state of elation and contemplation, articulated his experiences at Mankumban:

The drive to Mother Mary was amazing at night as it felt like we were crossing a different land one that was untouched and removed from the world. We passed through army checkpoints and finally we got to edge of the ocean where Mother Mary is. Filled with trees and an unusually cooling breeze, throughout Jaffna I only felt this breeze when in Bawa's room and then in Mother Mary's Mazhar. I tasted the sweet miraculous waters that filter from the ground. It was amazingly sweet. I gave my salaams and greeted Mother Mary and kissed

the 4 corners of her grave and thanked Ya Allah, the Rasul, and Bawa for giving me permission to see Mother Mary. I smelled Oud and a Flower that I can't remember its name on her Grave and in the Room [...] It felt like redemption. It felt like a thousand bricks were being lifted off of my back and it felt as if Mother Mary herself was saying, "It's gonna be OK. It's gonna be alright. I love you."<sup>327</sup>

For Ali, again the experience of being at Mankumban was similar to the experience of being at the *ashram*, where he expressed the unique feeling of the “cooling breeze” in a very dry and hot Jaffna Town. Ali’s journey began with a visit to Bawa’s *ashram* and ended with the finding of “redemption” at the tomb of Mother Mary, wherein he felt that Mother Mary personally was lessening his burden for a journey he took a personal vow to complete. At this imperative moment in his pilgrimage, he invoked God, the Prophet and Bawa, in gratitude for the grace to fulfill the journey and for the ability to cross the threshold of Mary’s resting place.

Shoaib, another member of the Fellowship who was also participating in the pilgrimage, similarly expressed the reason why the visitation to Mankumban was meaningful for him. In Chapter 3 Shoaib shared the significance of visiting the *mazar* in Coatesville as a means to “reaffirm” his commitment to Bawa. He paralleled this experience of visiting the *mazar* in Coatesville to Mankumban, when he expressed that “[...] Bawa Muhaiyaddeen and so is Mother Mary okay they are part of God, they are part of the divine light [...] that place symbolizes them.”<sup>328</sup> Shoaib’s comments illustrates why being at any site connected with Bawa or Mary, is a means to achieve proximity with the “divine light” of God. Arriving at the threshold of these significant spaces prepares one for moments of self-realization, one that includes both ridding

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<sup>327</sup> Follow up interview with author via email, Toronto, Canada. October 17, 2013.

<sup>328</sup> Shoaib, interview with author, Bay and Bloor Plaza, in downtown Toronto, Canada. October 9th, 2013.

oneself of the worldly ego (i.e., wealth and power) while simultaneously awakening oneself to the infinite nature of one's true self, a self that was given the "occasion" to tread in the "presence of God." It is the realization of these truths that resulted in Shoaib's emotional state in Mankumban.<sup>329</sup>

The pilgrimage group travelled to the *mazar* several times together during this particular trip. Most times pilgrims who spent time in the inner sanctuary were emotional and often expressed this through tears. There were moments of communal prayers, such as the singing of the *salawat* to the Prophet Muhammad or the recitation of *Surah al-Fatiha*, but most of the types of devotions that took place were individually oriented. At times, some of the children who were also part of the pilgrimage group went to the beach in front of Mankumban and frolicked in the water while the adults in the group prayed privately. The local Hindu devotees and the imam of Mankumban served as shrine-keepers, hosting the pilgrims, by serving the pilgrims water and fruits, such as mangoes and papayas. The pilgrims were visitors to Bawa's home, and so as local devotees who are caretakers of these spaces indicated that part of their responsibility entailed hosting to any guests of Bawa. Serving guests of Bawa was like serving Bawa himself. The act of Bawa's immediate disciples serving as shrine-keepers is repeated at both shrines, in Coatesville and Mankumban, further complicating easy categories between visitors, pilgrims, devotees and immediate disciples.

For the pilgrims whom I travelled with, and those who shared their experience of Mankumban with me, it was their dedication to Bawa and subsequently to Maryam that led their journey to Jaffna.<sup>330</sup> Still, their expedition was not merely a physical one that included physical

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<sup>329</sup> Shoaib, interview with author, Bay and Bloor Plaza, in downtown Toronto, Canada. October 9th, 2013.

<sup>330</sup> This significance of Mary, especially in Sufi teachings is discussed in Chapter 8. Chapter 8's subsection on Mary focuses on gender and Sufism and as representative of cosmological tradition of femininity.

and emotional acts of veneration at sacred spaces, rather gatherings in hotel lobbies and penthouse roof tops turned into collective contemplations and discussions. They used this time to engage in dialogue about Sufism and their purpose for travelling. Some of this informal discussion touched upon topics such as the difficulty of explaining to family members why travelling to such shrines was a part of their Islamic faith or even explaining who Bawa was to their immediate relations. Most of the members on this trip were predominately South Asians who had come to Bawa and the Fellowship after his passing, which meant that they were Muslims prior to encountering Bawa. They included East African Indians, Pakistanis and even South Asian Catholic followers of Bawa. The latter is representative of the new interested disciples coming to the Fellowship, of whom none were Hindus.

Some of these discussions consisted of trying to fathom what being a Sufi *really* entailed and the role of shrines such as Mankumban, that they were visiting. One of the individuals suggested that going to places like Mankumban was based on trying to receive inspiration, while others suggested that it was in order to get graces or blessings. Another pilgrim even quoted the South Asian mystic and poet Kabir<sup>331</sup> “not *mandir*, church or mosque your temple is within you” but if such was the case, why travel physically, should the journey be within? In response to this query, another quoted the famous hadith tradition in which Allah states, “take one step towards me, I will take ten steps towards you. Walk towards me, I will run towards you,” alluding to the

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<sup>331</sup> Kabir is an example of an antinominan figure from South Asia. Beyond knowing that he was from Varanasi and born sometime in the fifteenth century into a family of weavers, much else stays in the realm of hagiography when it comes to his biography. He has been claimed by Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus and is a testament to the legacy he left, which “illustrates the element of absurdity or futility that underlies the career of a great and courageous figure who passes from public contempt to adulation” (Hess 2002, 4). Much of what is known about him has been passed down via written compilations of his oral poems that encourage all to be seekers of truth. Most have also experienced Kabir in the Sikh sacred text known as the *Adi Granth*, where some of Kabir’s teachings are included. See *The Bijak of Kabir* (2002) for translated examples of Kabir’s poems. For more on Kabir please see *A Weaver Named Kabir: Selected Verses with a Detailed Biographical and Historical Introduction* (Vaudeville 1993).

fact that their presence here was indicative of the step that they were taking in order to get closer to God.

During this particular discussion, pilgrims even started asking “who” fundamentally takes the pilgrimage, was it the “I” or the ego-driven self? Who is the mover? The soul in essence is the Light of Allah and that means the soul is venerating itself and is the veneration, venerator and the venerated are all Allah and so one quoted “Allah wanted to be known so He created,” as a means to answer who is really a pilgrim. As the pilgrims of the Fellowship attempted to sort out their own purpose for being on this particular visit, they confirmed that the grace comes from knowing a *shaykh*, Bawa. In this light, they added further “it is the ego and the selfish qualities that get in the way of achieving that goal and limit one’s ability to seek the real you, which is the Divine within you.” This then they understood was the Sufi ultimatum to seek spiritual death before physical death, a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad.

Such discussions that I encountered throughout my travel with some members of the Fellowship in Sri Lanka indicate that though they arrived in Sri Lanka as pilgrims of Bawa, they were concerned and engaged with understanding Sufism while negotiating their own inherited sense of Islam with the newfound teachings of Bawa. As seekers, they were deeply endeavoring to grasp Sufism and how to be practically absorbed in God, as Sufis classically spoke of it and as Bawa presented it to them through his teachings. In this regard, they were not far different from their Hindu counterparts who shared the same space, who also sought Bawa’s grace through their everyday devotion.

It is at the crossroad of these complex shared devotional spaces and practices that links are forged and re-articulated. It is in this way that Bawa’s transnational community re-illuminates Sufi historicity and complexity amongst diverse religious adherents, one that has

remained the core of Sufism as a lived and transforming tradition. In tracing a phenomenon from Pennsylvania to Jaffna, I stumbled upon a space that challenges any definitive labels. Mankumban is a *masjid-mazar* complex utilized by Hindus and Muslims and hosts pilgrims who arrive at its threshold from America from Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions. It is dedicated to the sacred figure of Maryam, a shared female presence in Christian-Islamic traditions. And so as routes of Bawa were followed to his roots in Mankumban, his first ever-institutional establishment, the intricacies of Sufism in both embodied practices and in cosmological teachings is once again reaffirmed.

## **Conclusions**

In northern Sri Lanka where Bawa's centers were active during my fieldwork in July-August 2013, most of the disciples of Bawa I met were contending with post-war realities. Throughout the heights of the civil conflict both Mankumban and the *ashram* were momentarily abandoned and at other times it remained the refuge for families who were immobilized during the war. In the stories of survival relayed by devotees, they marveled at the fact that though homes were destroyed around the *ashram* and Mankumban, Bawa's spaces never were because of Bawa's protection. After the war the Sri Lankan Army squatted on Mankumban. With immediate concerns of losing the SSSC property the senior leaders in Jaffna decided that if people regularly visited the *masjid-mazar* complex, then the army could not take over the property. So they started advertising Friday prayers and meals. People began to come once again to Mankumban. Bawa's disciples in the north, then, are trying to return to a state of normalcy and security. Duty and service to Bawa helps enable this.

Since the end of the civil conflict, many more of Bawa's disciples from Canada, the United States and Saudi Arabia, are making pilgrimages to these centers, because this was the beginning of Bawa's ministry. This interaction between non-Tamils and Tamils further validates the devotion and service of those at the *ashram* and Mankumban on a daily basis. Though more needs to be explored on these immediate encounters, for instance, many of the pilgrims visiting from Canada and the United States usually do not pray together, partly because localized veneration of Bawa and his spaces are unusual, especially from the North American pilgrim's own Islamic practices. The incense, oil lamps and rituals or the rituals of *poosai* are alienating to those not culturally and religiously familiar with them. During one of the pilgrimages I was part of, the pilgrims and the locals present at the *ashram* did come together for a meal, but language was a severe barrier for any interaction. Often I became the translator between the Tamil and English speaking groups. Still, the reality is that these visits from Bawa's disciples from North America visit regularly and the presence of the North American disciples in Jaffna, from the initial days of helping to complete the building of Mankumban and the *ashram* to their regular visits now, forms part of the narrative of Bawa's continual presence in Jaffna. Accordingly, then, Sufism for this community is particularly intertwined with the development of Sufism in North America.

In a post-war Sri Lanka, television and print media forums have been dutiful about reporting repeated attacks on Muslim communities, especially on their mosques and businesses. The Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), a militant Buddhist movement, has been one such group that has led propaganda against Muslim communities and even attacked the Grandpass Mosque in Colombo on August 10, 2013. Sufi spaces in Sri Lanka are caught in the crossfire of militant Buddhist propaganda and some Muslims, who see such spaces as idolatrous, illustrating the complexities



of anti-Islamic sentiments from non-Muslims. These historical realities of Sufism and Islam and contemporary ethno-religious conflicts continuously unfolding in Sri Lanka, was the topic of Chapter 4 in this section. It is into this landscape that I situated Bawa's Serendib Sufi Study Circle. In spite of the latter efforts to purge narratives and spaces of Sufism from the state level and from Muslims who view Sufism as antithetical to Islam, instances of pluralism in the following of a Tamil Muslim swami was highlighted in Chapter 5 and 6.

A case study such as Bawa's comes at a poignant time in the history of Sri Lanka. Not as a means to subvert fundamental and challenging issues in Sri Lanka between ethnic and religious communities nor insinuate a return to a golden era, but rather it is the need, at least as scholars and researchers, to begin to move away from imposed structures of differences and acknowledge diverse heritages, religiosities and ways of being. This is what an analysis of Bawa's communities in Sri Lanka has illustrated, be it through the exploration of the rituals of *iftar* and daily prayers held at the *ashram* (Chapter 5) or the *masjid-mazar* complex the topic of this chapter. Both these chapters and the focus on sacred shared spaces and pilgrimages showcases states of co-existences that have undoubtedly been and continue to be the normative way of being amongst some diverse religious groups in Sri Lanka, of which one example is Bawa and his communities in Jaffna, Colombo, Matale and Puliyanukulam.

Aside from these chapters pointing to the fluidity of the community of Bawa in Sri Lanka, especially in the north, this section suggested that local Hindu devotees are at the forefront of preserving the Sufi teachings and practices of Bawa in Jaffna. This analysis is also critical comparatively if one is to fully understand the development of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship in North America, especially since the Fellowship is used as a case study for theorizing the fluctuating currents of Sufism in North America. This is substantial not only to

begin to rethink Sufism as a lived experience in embodied practices amongst fluid communities in Sri Lanka, but this particular research is also crucial to the transnational context of this spiritual community in North America, which is part of the global *ummah* (Muslim community).

In mapping this transnational spiritual community, I discussed similarities and differences from Pennsylvania to Jaffna and spaces in between. I located *masjids*, *ashrams* and *mazars*, while walking with pilgrims and devotees from varying ethnic and religious identities along the way. In the last section of this study, I explore three crosscutting themes as they relate to both major localities and the ritual activities and individual believers I encountered in the process of charting Bawa's communities. The following three thematically orientated chapters explore the titles acquired by Bawa, gender and finally issues of leadership and the future of both communities.

### **Section III**

#### **Bawa, Gender and Authority: Negotiating the Future Visions of the Fellowship and the Circle**

I am sitting in the house of Dr. Maccan-Markar in Colombo, the center of the Serendib Sufi Study Circle (SSSC). It is a Sunday morning in August and President Hilmi of the SSSC has just concluded his meeting. During the times that Hilmi led Sunday meetings, it became common that while he waited for his driver to pick him up, he would offer me some of his time, answering questions that I had about Bawa, his teachings or his community. This Sunday he asked me how my work of trying to understand Bawa was progressing and I explained that it was going well, that I was learning more about Bawa's early life and meeting many of his disciples, especially in Jaffna. He laughed and he relayed an incident with Bawa that he remembered. He said that one time someone asked Bawa to tell them about his life and Bawa scolded them saying "Why do you want to know about my life? What use is that to you?" Bawa said "ask about my words that I speak, use my words and make that part of your life, there is more worth in knowing about that than about my life!" Hilmi paused, smiled at me and asked, "Do you follow?" I nodded "Yes."

In the first section I focused on mapping the main spaces of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship in Philadelphia and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen' *mazar* in Coatesville, along with the activities that unfolded there. In Section II, I shifted to Sri Lanka in order to trace the Fellowship to Bawa's first institution, particularly to Jaffna where Bawa began his ministries. In exploring his *ashram* (Chapter 5) and Mankumban (Chapter 6), it became apparent that the diversity and plurality that has been suggested as a unique facet of the Fellowship in North America, was even more the case in Sri Lanka. Now that the networks of the communities of Bawa are generally mapped, the question then remains how does this plurality at the heart of both communities in two immensely different regions manifest?

These two religious communities with their respectively diverse followers but parallel institutional spaces are in effect dependent on Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen. With the physical passing of Bawa, the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship (BMF) and the Serendib Sufi Study Circle (SSSC) continues to understand Bawa as the sole authority of the community. Bawa appointed no successor prior to his death. Devotion to Bawa and his teachings is central throughout his spaces. Members of the Fellowship are resistant to anyone who attempts to claim any leadership away from Bawa. This is reflected in the many debates that have arisen after Bawa's death over visits from Sufi teachers from Turkey or Senegal or Islamic religious teachers who have attempted to subtly obtain leadership, all of whom without much institutional success. Some members have moved to other Sufi communities, as they have felt that a living *shaykh* is a necessity in their personal paths. For those who have remained, they understand Bawa through varying epithets ascribed to him. I call these epithets titles or honorifics in my discussion in Chapter 7. This acceptance of these different honorifics during Bawa's life led to the inclusion of diverse members in his transnational movement. The varying honorifics attributed to Bawa have

now transformed Bawa into a “timeless” figure in his death.

Chapter 8 explores an important discussion of gender in Sufism in North America. I do this by utilizing what I have gleaned from gender practices in Bawa’s spaces in Sri Lanka and North America. Early scholarship of Sufism in North America proposes that women in Sufi communities in North America have experienced more egalitarianism in practice and leadership than their counterparts in lands where Sufism was established or maintains a historical legacy. I examine if this is the development within the Fellowship and the Circle. In doing so I propose that in fact, though women are active in the Fellowship and maintain an engaged presence, be it through the leading of discourse meetings and the holding of executive positions, Bawa’s Sri Lankan ministries challenge this projected trend in scholarship. In Jaffna, the feminine presence, both in leadership positions (i.e., matron) and through sacred space (i.e., a *masjid-mazar* for Maryam and Bawa) is unparalleled in North America. It is in Jaffna that a matron assumes the role of a ritual leader and shrine caretaker, while in Mankumban a shrine is devoted to Maryam. These new spaces and authority challenge us to nuance how gender and Sufism is developing in North America.

Finally the last chapter of this section situates one of the most germane questions grappling the institutional future of the communities of Bawa both in North America and in Sri Lanka and that is of authority and its future. Where I began this section with a chapter that solidifies the centrality of the authority of the figure of Bawa, I end it with the uncertainty of how to go forth when diversity is difficult to maintain without a charismatic leader to forge the way. The Fellowship Executive Committee maintains full legal authority of the Fellowship and subcommittees exist to help maintain spaces, such as the *masjid* and the *mazar*, and oversee the various activities, such as publications. All decisions are based on the constitutions established

by Bawa and or through his teachings. However, as evident by now Bawa brought together a spectrum of followers in his Fellowship and the Serendib Sufi Study Circle. What then happens to these diverse followers who now must negotiate with each other's distinctive understanding of what the Fellowship and the Circle should be?

The final chapter maps some of these responses and ends with Bawa's own response to his communities when he was alive through the metaphor of "The Pond." Bawa's vision of the Fellowship and the Circle was as an ecosystem sustained by the presence of the water of life, which provides and sustains a diversity of organisms and creatures. Bawa and his message of the singular Divine is the water contained in the ecosystem of the pond, and the Fellowship and the Circle are the systems that maintain the water, for without it life cannot be sustained. The pond sustains the water and all creatures that arrive at the pond have a place and a purpose, but should readily have access to the water. This is in effect the Fellowship and the Circle, the transnational communities of Bawa from Pennsylvania to Jaffna.

## Chapter 7

### Swami to *Qutb*: Bawa Muhaiyaddeen as the *Insan Kamil*

#### Introduction

Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen (d. 1986) began his ministries in northern Sri Lanka in the midst of political and ethnic unrest and moved to Philadelphia to establish new communities in 1971. He was a farmer, a cook, a healer, a painter, a philosopher and a charismatic teacher. His teachings were not limited to a religious, caste or ethnic community. He kept company with anyone who welcomed him and wished to hear his words. This, however, did not stop bystanders, followers, devotees or critics from attempting to define or other him. But Bawa evaded such definitions:

My appearance to the people who see me depends on how the various groups of them choose to view me [...]. The Muslims say that I am a Tamil swami. The Tamils [Hindus] say that I am a Muslim swami [...]. The Christians say that I am a Tamil swami [...]. In this manner each such group to whom I go keep on ascribing names to me [...]. If there are any more such names, I am happy to have them (Muhaiyaddeen 1988, i).

The above quote by Bawa points to the reality of his ministry. It is a ministry, as noted from Sections I and II that are inclusive and diverse. Bawa's ability to attract a heterogeneous audience inevitably resulted in varied interpretations of who Bawa was by his disciples. Hanal Thambi, a senior student of Bawa in Philadelphia, explained this diversity through the metaphor of a "gem":

But then he also said when he passes he will go into all of his children's hearts and [...] as a facet. So the way he kind of used it is like a facet of the gem. So each of us that were touched by him, have become a facet of a gem [...] that is the *Qutb*. So it's just like a gem has many cuts and slices and things [...] so each facet has its own reflection or way of, you know, redisplaying that light. So he's in our hearts and we're all a facet of him. I mean I miss him, you know, there's no question about that I mean he's the only [...] only sanity in the world when he was here. You know the only reality [...] so from time to time I think about that you know, how much I would like to be next to him.<sup>332</sup>

It is these “facets of the gem” that reflect the different illuminations of Bawa that form his diverse institutions. These have included Hindus in Jaffna and Muslims in Colombo, while Philadelphia includes a broad range of Muslim-Sufis, converts to Islam, universally inclined Sufis and Jewish and Catholic-Sufis. Each of these identities alludes to the disciples' inherited religious identities and its marriage with Bawa's teaching, which was understood as Sufism. At present newly arriving immigrant Muslims from various countries, such as Pakistan or Syria, also add to this mixture in North America. This creates a convergence of approaches to spiritual and religious outlooks of who Bawa is and what his teachings and spaces signify.

This chapter, then, focuses on the central human authority that is basis of both the Fellowship and the Circle, not as a means to provide a biographical outline of Bawa, which has been implicitly presented throughout my study, but rather to consider the different honorifics or epithets given to Bawa by his disciples, both in his life and now in his death. These titles given to Bawa by his disciples provide insight into the distinct cultural and religious milieus that Bawa

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<sup>332</sup> Hanal Thambi, interview with the author, the garden of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 12, 2014.



was placing himself within. These titles include *guru*, *swami*, *father*, *shaykh* and *qutb*. In both communities there is reference to Bawa as a *Qutb* (axial pole), the highest station given to a Sufi saint. *Al-Qutb* is translated as the pole or axis of the universe. It signifies an individual who has attained an inner gnosis that is completed through outward manifestation of radiance. This radiance attracts followers. In Sufism it could be understood as the “Pole of a Spiritual Hierarchy,” or can refer to an era, i.e., the “Pole of a Period” (Buckhardt 1976, 123). Amongst his Jaffna contingency, Mauroof (1976) notes that Bawa was equated with Lord Muhaiyaddeen or *Qutb* Muhaiyaddeen as well as the Hindu deity Murukan, while Bawa’s affinity to Abdul Qadir Jilani (d. 1166) is also held by his Muslim followers in Colombo. In my own fieldwork, disciples of Bawa explained that he was not limited to the physical form they had seen him. Rather the essence of Bawa, or the *Awwal Qutb* (the first axial pole), transcended linear time and space and was a universal cosmological principle. Bawa’s disciples used his discourses to substantiate this understanding. These include discourses wherein he explained that he taught the Prophet Adam how to toil the lands after Adam’s exile from paradise to Serendib (Sri Lanka), that he was Abdul Qadir Jilani meditating in the caves of Balangoda in central Sri Lanka and that he had encountered the perennial mystic and guide Khidr (Muhaiyaddeen 2003). The latter connections to Hindu, Muslim and Sufi personages continued to follow Bawa into America.

With the analysis of the honorific title of *Qutb*, the ultimate state of spiritual realization equated to Bawa by his followers is that of *al-insan al-kamil*.<sup>333</sup> This state of perfection is paradigmatic of the Prophet Muhammad and was later attributed to the companions of the prophet, saints, imams (in Shi’a thought) and *shaykhs*. This theological concept forms a

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<sup>333</sup> For more on Bawa’s teaching on *insan kamil* please see my article “The *Insan Kamil* of Bawa: the Metaphysics of a Tamil Sufi Sheikh” in *The Sri Lanka Journal of Humanities* (Vol. 39 pp. 51-63, 2013).

significant historical legacy in Sufi cosmology. This ideal of the *insan kamil*, I contend, is not only the state that the members of Bawa's communities see in Bawa, but it forms the primary teaching given by Bawa to his followers. Bawa asserted that this level of being is the potential of all human beings. It is the latter correlations between these titles that I aim to highlight further in this chapter. The varying titles given to Bawa by his disciples are based on a common acceptance that he is a perfected being (*insan kamil*)- this remains the continuous from Sri Lanka to North America.

### **Narratives of Bawa from Early Scholarship to His Disciples**

In an early anthology of Bawa's teachings compiled by senior disciples in Sri Lanka entitled *Guru Mani (Teacher's Jewel)* (1961), the authors of the text suggest that Bawa arrived in Sri Lanka in 1889 from South India (Narayan and Sawhney 1960, 10). If this were the case, at the time of his death Bawa would have been well over one hundred years old.<sup>334</sup> This of course is difficult to confirm, as Bawa did not relay personal information about himself, especially his age. Amorphous details of the early years (i.e., birth, family or spiritual training) of Bawa before his sighting at Kataragama further add to the mystique of Bawa's story. The latter trend toward vague biographical details is often the norm in the life stories of classical Sufi personalities.

The discourses that address his personal life were collected overtime and published in the book entitled, *The Tree that Fell to the West: Autobiography of a Sufi* (2003).<sup>335</sup> This is a compilation of different discourses that were given in Tamil and translated into English and then

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<sup>334</sup> Frank Korom explores the possible age of Bawa, for more see his contribution in *Interreligious Dialogue and the Cultural Shaping of Religions* (2012) entitled "Speaking with Sufis: Dialogue With Whom and About What?"

<sup>335</sup> Frank Korom (2011; 2012; 2012b) in his studies on the historical Bawa is apprehensive about utilizing these narratives. He writes they are "cobbled together by sympathetic editors from thousands of hours of tape recordings, [and] reads more like a transcendental dialogue with God, unhindered by the fetters of time and space, than an historical account of his life" (2011, 21).

edited into a book format. This text serves as the Fellowship's sacred biography of Bawa. In it, for instance, he explained that there was once a powerful king who was childless. In the hope of gaining mercy from God, he promised to perform rituals for twelve years so that God would bless him with a child. He built temples, churches and mosques and performed prayers in each sacred space. In the twelfth year of service the king went to the festival at Murukan temple. On the eve of the festival, the king had a "vision" which directed him to a shrine to find a baby on the steps (Muhaiyaddeen 2003). On the day of the festival the king and a hired driver were walking to the shrine when they found a hideous and sickly baby on the steps. The king was disgusted and walked past it but the driver was sympathetic and picked him up. The king reprimanded the driver and threatened the driver to leave the baby but the driver refused. Fired from his position, the driver walked back to his frugal home to his wife and two children, but as he walked the baby began to regain life, beauty and health.

Time passed and the king decided to summon his driver to return to his job. When the driver appeared at the king's abode with the baby from the temple, the king fell in love "with the light radiating" from the baby's face (Muhaiyaddeen 2003). The king asked for the child but the driver did not want to give him up. Agreeing to share the responsibility of the baby, the driver and his family moved to the king's palace with the child. Eventually, due to his wealth, many tried to kill him. So his father hid him away in the jungles with a *shaykh* (Muhaiyaddeen 2003, 31-39). But Bawa gave up his "kingdom [...] to the poor" and stayed with the *shaykh* till he was eighteen, when he left to wander the world in search of God (Muhaiyaddeen 2003, 31-39).

Bawa claimed that his search for the Divine led him to "India, Egypt, Iran, Jerusalem and China," along the way he "went into the four religions" of Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam, where he tried very hard to be with God. Still he explains:

[...]he God whom I had within my wisdom was not found there [...]. I became crazy, crazy to see my Father. So again I left and this time I went into the jungle and stayed in the caves. I searched for Him in many, many places. I met the creations called *jinn*s and the creation called fairies. They came to me in numbers and I roamed about them [...]. Still I did not find God. I did learn some of their tricks from them, but that was not God, and so I left them to search further. I went through indescribable difficulties and countless dangers and troubles, until I came to a point where I had to understand who my Father was (quoted in Narayan and Sawhney 1961, 9).

In this particular story, it is relayed that Bawa himself was an orphaned baby who went on to search for wisdom. He suggested that he was adopted by a king and endowed with wealth beyond imagination and choose to leave it all behind to learn with a *shaykh* (master) in the mountains while other times he explains that he cleaned toilets, learned how to bake and toiled on farms for a living (Muhaiyaddeen 2003, 31-39, 91, 99). In this narrative, which is difficult to authenticate, Bawa presents no real familial ties but models what is within everyone's capacity to do, to ask questions and seek answers. This would have resonated with his American followers; as such stories form one type of narratives held by members of the Fellowship in America.

Mohamed Mauroof<sup>336</sup> situates the “phenomenon of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen” as both “paradoxical and contradictory” (1976, 23). For Mauroof Bawa is seen as a “living human religious symbol with many modalities of meaning for his adherents” (Mauroof 1976, 23). In the many different modes or attributes that Bawa contained for his disciples, Mauroof specifically explores “Bawa” and “Muhaiyaddeen” in his own personal experience of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen.

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<sup>336</sup> For more biographical detail on Mauroof please see Chapter 2's discussion of the early years of the Fellowship.

Mauroof in his retelling of Bawa presents a “mythological theory” of Bawa and a “liturgical Bawa” (1976, 57). This is to say that Bawa utilized story telling, such as the one relayed above, and ritual as attributes in his representation of himself (Mauroof 1975). Mauroof adds further “Bawa revealed in his own statements- has a point of view about the dramaturgical Bawa” (1976, 57). These statements for dramatic representation of Bawa by Bawa included “I am the lowest of the low” (1976, 57).

Frank Korom (2011; 2012; 2012b) takes a far more historical and sociological approach to Bawa. Korom often divides Bawa’s life into “three staged ‘comings’” and correlates the stages with the “institutionalization” of the Fellowship. The first stage is when Bawa arrived in northern Sri Lanka and was perceived as a “Hindu guru or Sufi sheikh,” during this phase he cultivated land, healed and settled disputes amongst the locals (2012, 7). The second stage is his ministry “to the elite of Colombo” who were mostly Muslims oriented towards philosophical, theosophical and mystical tendencies (2012, 7). And the third stage was his ministry in the United States, where Korom argues, Bawa asserted himself as the “typical perennial mystic” (2012, 7).

My own studies of the life of Bawa are influenced by both of these previous scholars approaches- one that utilizes anthropological, historical and sociological understandings of Bawa. However, I have also gleaned from disciples of Bawa and Bawa himself (i.e., via his discourses). It is for this reason that I prefer the method utilized by Mauroof in his study of the “modalities” of Bawa. Mauroof referred to the liturgical Bawa in more detail, though I prefer to use the label of a “timeless” Bawa to distinguish from Mauroof’s term. I do this primarily because of Annemarie Schimmel’s (1985) approach to the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Schimmel (1985) found in her study that more than the historical Muhammad, it is the narratives

that formed after Muhammad's passing that command much of the devotions and pieties to the timeless Muhammad amongst his mystically inclined and pious followers. As such, with the physical passing, more than with the historical Bawa, it is the individually perceived and mystically venerated Bawa that forms the center of his communities.

Bawa's self-given names are also significant. Bawa's own names of Muhammad and Muhaiyaddeen, for instance are significant indicators of his mystical orientations towards Islam, but not limited by it. The name "bawa", a name that was personally used by Bawa, is a common title used by mendicants and *fakirs* (wandering ascetics) in Sri Lanka, which equally points to the cultural milieu Bawa was steeped in.<sup>337</sup> During his life, however, Bawa acquired many titles in addition to his own names. His disciples gave these titles to him from Sri Lanka to the United States, which have included *swami* (guru or lord) and *Qutb* (axial pole). These titles have become Bawa's legacy and in his death have continued to transform. Although historical details remain scant in terms of the early life of Bawa, his self-ascribed names along with titles given to him by his disciples serve as valuable elucidations to situating his sacred position amongst his followers. In essence, then, comprehending the fluidity of Bawa's identities and titles helps to grasp the vibrant nature of his followers who implore Bawa through his countless names and titles from Sri Lanka to the United States.

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<sup>337</sup> For a discussion of this please see Chapter 4's subsection on *Sufism in Sri Lanka*.

## From *Swami* to *Qutb*: the Many Titles of Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen

### *Guru Bawa*

In Jaffna disciples of Bawa still refer to him as *swami* (lord or priest) or guru. This idea of a guru in many South and East Asian cultural contexts has both a particular and expansive significance, though it has a particular affinity to Hinduism in South Asia. The French Sanskritist Loui Renou explained, “The dynamic, sacred centre of Hinduism is [...] the enlightened guru, whose charismatic leadership creates the institution for philosophical, religious, and social change” (quoted in Hirst and Zavos, 2011, 115). In their recent edited volume Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame (2012)<sup>338</sup> present the cultural and religious legacy of gurus in South Asia in their introduction. In it they introduce guru in South Asia as the following:

Guru/ n. 1. A Hindu spiritual teacher 2. Each of the ten leaders of the Sikh religion 3. An influential teacher or expert: a management guru- ORIGIN from Hindi and Punjabi, from sanskrit guru ‘weight, grave’ (cf. L. gravis), hence ‘elder, teacher’ (2012, 1).

Guru in South Asia could also include *maharaj*, *sant*, *baba*, *sadhu*, *mahant*, *swami*, *sanyasi* and *acharya* (2012, 1).

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<sup>338</sup> Jacob Copeman is a Professor in Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh’s School of Social and Political Science. His area of research includes South Asia, gurus, atheism and medical practices. Aya Ikegame is a Research Associate for OECUMENE Project (Citizenship after Orientalism) at the Open University. Her recent publications include *The Princely India Re-imagined: A Historical Anthropology of Mysore from 1799 to the present* (2012) and *The Guru in South Asia: New interdisciplinary Perspectives* (co-edited with Jacob Copeman, 2012).

One of the critical aspects of the “guru” according to the editors is that “the guru was *always* a social form of peculiar suggestibility; a veritable ‘vector between domains’ (Carsten 2011:2)” (Copeman and Ikegame 2013, 2). Copeman and Ikegame continue to write:

[...] containment comes to form an aspect of his [her] uncontainability because a feature of his [her] being unconfined is his [her] containing everything. He [her] ‘contains’ his [her] spiritual forebears and a range of other associations/affiliations (there is seemingly no limit to them) and this contributes dramatically to his [her] expansibility (2013, 16).

The title of “guru” in traditions, such as Hinduism or Sikhism, was ascribed to human beings who maintained positions of “in-betweenness.” This position allowed for versatility, which further enabled a guru to cater to different audiences and, even at times to defy social and religious norms. The guru’s role as a spiritual authority was often closely tied to his/her charismatic personality, which allowed for this methodology to be maintained. This in many regards was the success of gurus, as they redefined social and religious norms. As a result sometimes gurus were deified.

Further, Hindu followers of Muslim teachers are not uncommon in historical or contemporary realities in South Asia. In fact Sufi teachers are known to have had Hindu and even Sikh devotees, while practices such as visitation to *mazars* are common across different religious denominations in South Asia (Ernst; 1992; 1997; Schimmel; 1975; Flueckiger 2006; Sikand 2007; Bellamy 2011; Bigelow 2010). These inter-religious movements are notable amongst Bawa’s communities and spaces in Jaffna.<sup>339</sup> The devotees with whom I spoke with in

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<sup>339</sup> For Bawa’s communities and spaces in Jaffna, please see Chapter 5 and 6.



Jaffna, especially those whom I met in the *ashram* and Mankumban, accepted Bawa as a Muslim teacher, though their own identity of being a Hindu did not necessarily need to be altered to be a devotee of Bawa. This was prominent in the outlook of Engineer Thamby, who remains a Hindu follower of Bawa, or even the matron of the *ashram*, who though originally Hindu and now donning the *hijab* relayed to me that conversion to Islam was not an expectation by Bawa for his disciples.

Amongst the Hindus in Jaffna, they often explained that Bawa was “like god” (*kadavul*) or was a *swami* (lord). The reason for their devotion to him was because of his proximity to god that created god-like qualities in him. In his early ministry in Jaffna, many of the Hindu devotees also found affinity between the local deity Murukan and Bawa. In fact, *The Tree that Fell to the West: Autobiography of a Sufi* (2003) notes that Bawa narrated that he was found as a baby at the temple of Murukan by a king, associating Bawa with Murukan. In Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu poems, such as *puram*<sup>340</sup> the quality of *mara* (courage in warfare) is associated with the deity of Murukan and is most revered. Though temples dedicated to Saiva are common in Sri Lanka it is Murukan and his heroism that is most traditionally venerated in Tamil Hinduism in Sri Lanka, especially in relation to pilgrimages to Kataragama in Sri Lanka, a site shared by Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists. For Hindus this mountain, which is on the same longitude as the sacred *axis mundi* Mount Kailas,<sup>341</sup> is associated with Lord Murukan or Skanda, as he is known in

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<sup>340</sup> *Puram* is poetry found in Tamil literary tradition that usually conveyed the actions of kings and their life. These poems are treated as historically sound for the devotees who utilize them. For more discussion on *puram* please see Norman Cutler’s *Songs of Experience: the Poetics of Tamil Devotion* (1987), especially his chapter on “Poems, Poets and Poetics.”

<sup>341</sup> Mount Kailas is 6714m (22, 026ft) and sits northwest of the western Nepal, Indian and Tibetan border (Pritchard-Jones and Gibbons 2007, 15). It holds religious significance for Hindus, Buddhist, Jains and Bonpo, the indigenous of Tibet. For Hindus it is the center of the universe. Often described as being “beyond the Hindukush range, in the land called Bharata or Hindustan” Mount Kailasa in Hindu cosmology is the residence of the god Siva (god of destruction), his partner Parvati (Uma) and their two sons Ganesa (god of success) and Karttikeya (“commander-in-chief” or Murukan in Tamil) and two daughters Laksmi (goddess of social welfare) and Sarasvati (goddess of

Sanskrit.<sup>342</sup> The correlation between Bawa and Hindu traditions, specifically to Lord Murukan, a popular Tamil Hindu deity is a significant and distinct tradition amongst his Tamil devotees in Jaffna. However, such correlations of Bawa with the Hindu deity Murukan creates very fluid boundaries that lead one to ask was Bawa God or god-like?

Mauroof documents one such example of this fluidity of identities equated to Bawa during a *mawlid* celebration he participated at the *ashram* in the early years, prior to Bawa's arrival in America.

Some young children had boldly written a statement proclaiming that Bawa is God in a light-fixture made to be used as part of the decorations for the feast. That was the nature of their devotion to Bawa. The parents of the children who were also present at the feast did not seem to mind the enthusiasm of the children. However, when the time came to hang the light fixture on the roof of the ashram as part of the decorations, several of the persons [present] protested, and the fixture was never hung up (1976, 50).

These personal perceptions of Bawa and the resulting acts of devotions are very fluid in northern Sri Lanka, as evident in rituals observed in the *ashram* (Chapter 5) and at Mankumban (Chapter 6), especially with the commemoration of Hindu festival of light to Lord Murukan and the lighting of clay oil lamps.

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culture) (Sil 2005, 99). Siva resides here. Buddhists revere it as “Kang Rinpoche” or “precious jewel of the snows” that has the power to rid one of one's sins (Pritchard-Jones and Gibbons 2007, 15). For Jains, it is the site in which their first Jain prophet reached enlightenment and so is called the “sacred peak of Asthapada” (Pritchard-Jones and Gibbons 2007, 15). For an introductory study of this space see *The Mount Kailash Trek: Tibet's Sacred Mountain and Western Tibet* (2007) or a photo account of this space *Holy Mount Kailash A Pilgrimage in Tibet* (2013) by Milan Rakocovic.

<sup>342</sup> Please see Chapter 4's discussion of Kataragama and Murukan in the subsection of *Sufism in Sri Lanka* for more on this figure.

For some, such as Engineer Thambi,<sup>343</sup> who is one of the senior leaders of the Jaffna sites and who has led the reconstruction of Bawa's farm at Puliyanukulam, understands that while prophets bring the message of God, the *Qutb* "synthesizes" this message. According to Engineer Thambi, that is exactly what Bawa did.<sup>344</sup> Being a Hindu devotee of Bawa, Engineer Thambi's interpretation of Bawa is still steeped in both Hinduism and Sufism, which are not contradictory for him. In fact, in the newly refurbished farm house at Puliyanukulam, not only was there a painting of the Sufi saint Moinuddin Chishti (d. 1236), the famous saint of the Chishti order of Sufism in Ajmer, India, along with photographs and pictures of Bawa, his books and of the *masjid* in Philadelphia.<sup>345</sup> There was also a framed photograph of the sacred Mount Kailas, the mountain that is venerated as the abode of Lord Shiva, and its accompanying Lake Manasarovar, which is located in Tibet, China, placed by Engineer Thambi.<sup>346</sup> Bawa's Sri Lankan disciples are establishing their own milieu in which they understand Bawa, be it through Hindu sacred cosmology and deities, or sacred geography.

The title *bawa* is a common label for Sufi mendicants and *fakirs* (wandering ascetics) across Sri Lanka.<sup>347</sup> Bawa's role was central to celebration of *mawlid*s of the Prophet Muhammad and Abdul Qadir Jilani in Sri Lanka. Sufi *shaykhs* served as ritual leaders during *mawlid*s, either through the leading of singing or in performances of acts of ecstasies and self-

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<sup>343</sup> He is discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 in relation to the *ashram* and Mankumban please see these chapters for more information on him.

<sup>344</sup> Interview with author, in Puliyanukulam Farm of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, Vavuniya, Sri Lanka in July 13, 2013.

<sup>345</sup> While I was visiting the Matale branch of the Serendib Sufi Study Circle in Sri Lanka, devotees had painted portraits of Abdul Qadir Jilani and Moinuddin Chishti (d.1236) alongside with a photograph of Bawa. When I asked the custodians of the Matale shrine about these photographs, they explained to me that both these Sufi masters influenced Bawa. They also added that Bawa painted Chishti's *dargah* in Ajmer, which to them further solidified Bawa's connection with the Chishti *tariqa* for this family of devotees. In stories that were relayed to me about the painting of Chishti's *mazar* by Bawa, senior disciples explained that Bawa had a vision of this *mazar* and thus painted it from his memory of the vision, though he himself never visited it. In my research of Bawa thus far, I have not come across discussion of these connections as explained by Bawa himself.

<sup>346</sup> Interview with author, Puliyanukulam Farm of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, Vavuniya, Sri Lanka July 13, 2013.

<sup>347</sup> In Chapter 4 subsection on *Sufism in Sri Lanka*, this is discussed further especially in relation to studies by McGilvray (2004) and Schomburg (2003), please see this chapter for more.

mortification associated with Rifa'i, a prominent Sufi order.<sup>348</sup> In short, bawas were a regular feature of the Islamic landscape. They were the key performers and leaders in ceremonies, music and rituals at shrines during Sufi celebrations while also serving as shrine keepers.

The association of Bawa with the Baba/Bawa (father) Adam, the first father of mankind and his casting to Serendib, are significant to the lineage of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen (Mauroof 1976, 25). Bawa's connection to Adam's Peak with the Prophet Adam (Baba Adam), Dafter Jailani (Abdul Qadir Jilani) and Kataragama (perennial mystic Khidr and Murukan) steeps him in a very unique sacred geography associated with Islam and Sufism in Sri Lanka. Notably these are also sites that are the foundations of shared sacred narratives and pilgrimages across Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Buddhist members in the country. Therefore, in the context of Sri Lanka, the titles "Guru Bawa" connects Bawa to two predominant Tamil religious traditions, that of Hinduism and Sufism. So where "bawas" were a common feature in Islamic and Hindu terrain in Sri Lanka, Bawa would make "bawa" a unique and distinct figure in North America.

Bawa arrived in Philadelphia in the counter-cultural era of the United States during the frequency of the "guru" culture of the 1970s. There were gurus from the "East" who presented various versions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Eastern mystical traditions across the United States. In the Fellowship, most of the early members came from the culture of seeking of the 1960s and 1970s. They were steeped in the spiritual movements of the time. For instance, they read memoirs and books of gurus, such as *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1964) by Paramahansa Yogananda or *The Sufis* (1964) by Idries Shah. In the early years of Bawa's Philadelphia context his title of "guru" was removed both from the institutional name of the Fellowship and the name of Bawa publicly. This was the case because of the negative association of "guru" that began to

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<sup>348</sup> Please see Chapter 4's subsection *Sufism in Sri Lanka* for more details on the Rifa'i order.

proliferate in America,<sup>349</sup> as some spiritual leaders across the United States were taking advantage of their disciples. During this period the scandals of sexual indiscretion or abuses of power were commonly reported. Bawa did not want to have such an association with the Fellowship or himself. Within the community, members still utilized this name for Bawa privately but institutionally they no longer publicly presented Bawa as a guru. Thus “Guru Bawa” eventually turned into just Bawa, which remains the common referent of Bawa to this day. However, Bawa’s appeal to the American followers was immensely personal and oriented towards a relationship of “love.” Mauroof captured this when he stated that there was a more distanced devotional approach to Bawa performed by the Sri Lankan devotees in relation to the way American disciples’ approached Bawa. He writes “there was an exuberance of the ‘love’ principle in the American scenes of this story” (1976, 27-28). It was this formidable relationship that solidified Bawa as a symbolic and at times a real father figure and patriarch to his American disciples.

### *Bawa as “the Father”*

The name of Bawa is synonymous with a father (i.e., *baba* or father), which crystallized Bawa’s role as a *shaykh*. This was a title that was common amongst his Colombo contingency, but was formalized amongst his American followers. Khair un-Nisa, a member of the Fellowship in

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<sup>349</sup> These included gurus, such as Ram Dass and the infamous Chogyam Trungpa. Author of the popular *Be Here Now*, Ram Dass (born Richard Alpert in 1931) is an American spiritual teacher and prolific author. He is also a student of Hindu guru Neem Karoli Baba (d. 1973). He teaches via his website: <http://www.ramdass.org> (Accessed August 12, 2014). Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939-1987) was a Tibetan Buddhist meditation master and teacher in the lineage of Kagyu and Nyingma traditions. He was also the eleventh Trungpa tulku. He founded the Shambhala organization. He arrived in the United States after his stay in England, where he married Diana Pybus. Known for the teaching of “crazy wisdom” and the founding of the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, his later life was riddled with scandals of drug and alcohol abuse and illicit sexual activities. He would eventually die in Halifax, Nova Scotia where he moved the Shambhala headquarters. For more see <http://www.shambhala.org/teachers/chogyam-trungpa.php> (Accessed August 12, 2014).

Philadelphia who met Bawa when he first arrived to America, explained her personal understanding of this:

Who is Bawa? *Bismillah ar-rahman ar-rahim* [In the name of Allah, the most compassionate, most merciful]. What came to my mind is like he's my primal father. I feel that I knew Bawa before, like I had seen him before, and it was all comfortable and familiar to me. And some people see Bawa as a brother according to their exalted state. For me, I feel like a moth in a flame to him. That he is a father who taught me and is teaching me the true path of God and the light of God and to be like him, to intend to be like him. I feel like that story when the wasp was flying around and telling the insect "Be like me. Be like me."<sup>350</sup>

Bawa as the father (both symbolic and literal for some disciples) was cosmologically oriented (i.e., the "primal father") but also defined as a *shaykh* who taught his students how to reach the "exalted state." According to his disciples, this "exalted state" was one which he lived. For members like Khair un-Nisa, Bawa is the ultimate teacher in the master-disciple (*murid-murshid*) relationship. This dynamic often resulted in the identifying of the Fellowship as Bawa's "funny family" in which Bawa was the father-figure and his disciples were his "children." He became both a real father and a mother (a symbol of a parent), in that he tended to his children's needs, cooked for them, healed many (spiritually and physically). In doing these acts of caretaking, members such as Khair un-Nisa, relate to Bawa as a parental figure and a true representative of the one true father/mother (i.e., God).

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<sup>350</sup> Khair un-Nisa, interview with author, office of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 18, 2014.

Bawa as the father was explained to me also in Ali's response after his pilgrimage to Mankumban.<sup>351</sup> When I asked him about his experience during his pilgrimage to Jaffna to see Bawa's *ashram* and Mankumban, he explained, "Bawa is my Father, my Master, and my Shaikh. The Emerald jewel of my Heart and the Emerald light of my Eyes. He who pulled me out of the Fire, wrote upon my hands, and took me under his protection."<sup>352</sup> Bawa's role as the father portrays his larger sacred role as a *shaykh*, teacher and protector, for his disciples, like Ali, who invokes him in his prayers. Similar to Khair un-Nisa, he is beyond the earthly father and in fact becomes the ever-present entity and being that remains spiritually present.

Rick Boardman is a senior student of Bawa in Philadelphia. His arrival to the Fellowship was through his involvement in non-violence movements, especially with the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), which he was part of during the counter-cultural era and the anti-draft movements. He explained that being in the presence of such a guru and father as Bawa, was in itself the process of enlightenment:

You asked what it was like being in Bawa's presence, *darshan* [see below] the concept of *darshan*, sitting in the presence of the master. What do you experience? You experience bliss. Why do you experience bliss? Because there's an energy field that's being, that's coming through the master but floats all boats. What am I talking about there? I'm talking about the impact of his consciousness on my consciousness. Not touching each other, not doing anything, not common prayer, not anything. Being in his presence elevates my sense of being, gives me peace, feels familiar, feels safe, feels hopeful, is experienced

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<sup>351</sup> For Ali's experience during his pilgrimage to Mankumban please see Chapter 6's subsection *Pilgrimages to Bawa's Spaces in Sri Lanka by Members of the Fellowship*.

<sup>352</sup> Follow up interview with author via email, Toronto, Canada. December 3, 2013.

sometimes as great power and sometimes simply as great safety. Reassurance, he's a father, right? He's a loving father. He's my father. And he talks about God that way himself. Allah is my father says the Muslim *shaykh*. And we all know that Islam doesn't believe in that kind of relationship between man and God.<sup>353</sup>

For members, such as Boardman, his relationship to Bawa was formed by the impact that Bawa had on his inner development, one that was mediated by being present with Bawa. Boardman parallels this dynamic of *darshan*, the Hindu concept of receiving grace from sight of a deity, to being in the presence of Bawa. For Boardman, similar to Khair un-Nisa, the relationship between him and Bawa embodies the ultimate dynamic of the relationship between humanity and the One Father (i.e., God or Allah). Such an intimate relationship between God and humanity, states Boardman, is not adhered to in Islam. To further this understanding of Bawa as *guru*, *swami* and *shaykh*, which is dependent on Bawa being the loving father, another title is added, that of the *Qutb* (the axial pole).

#### *Muhaiyaddeen- the Qutb*<sup>354</sup>

Rahmat Bibi met Bawa when she was only nineteen years old through a friend who had introduced her to Bawa's teachings. Since Bawa was away in Sri Lanka, she did not physically meet him until he returned from Sri Lanka in 1978. For Rahmat Bibi, her perception of Bawa was and is was dependent on Bawa being her father and thus her *shaykh*. What is more, though,

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<sup>353</sup> Rick Boardman, interview with author, home of interviewee Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 14, 2014.

<sup>354</sup> Please see Chapter 1's discussion of Abdul Qadir Jilani and Chapter 4's discussion of Jilani in *Sufism in Sri Lanka* for more discussion of the relationship of Jilani and the *Qutb*.



for Rahmat Bibi, Bawa the *shaykh* and father figure was intimately predicated on his state as the *Qutb*, the axial pole of the universe:

You know at the very beginning, that was part of what really solidified my connection at the beginning was that I was seeing, I didn't know it myself, but he saw something worthy in me that I didn't see. I didn't see it, but he did it and that is what he cultivated going back to the father and the child and that when you think like of the father and the child no matter how much they love you there are still biases. And because Bawa wasn't my biological father his love exceeded that line and was in a different realm. It was like a father in the way that God is the father. You know I don't call him God but he is an integral part of that process for me to get to God. And he's, he's not even a he, he's really as the *Qutb* he's really mingled within the conscience of man and Muhaiyaddeen is the reviver, the reviver of faith. So within that like conscience is that guide, the one that guides from within. So you don't have to meet you know, Bawa who came, whatever the reasons he came, but beyond his form and in that form of the *Qutb*, that is within every man. It's mingled with the *nur* (light) of the *Qutb*. The *nur* is the light. And the *Qutb* is the guide, the reviver, the explainer.<sup>355</sup>

In Rahmat Bibi's comments above she notes that it was because Bawa was not her biological father that her relationship with him, which manifested like a father-child relationship, was far superior, because even without biological ties Bawa's love "exceeded" regular love. And so it

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<sup>355</sup> Rahmat Bibi, interview with author, Starbucks, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 3, 2014.

really reflected the love of God. It is this central act of love and its marriage with the “*nur* (light)” that is the basis of the *Qutb* as the “guide, the reviver, the explainer.”

Bawa made no direct proclamations of his associations to the lineage of Abdul Qadir Jilani, though Jilani forms a significant connection in the life of Bawa, as seen throughout this study. Bawa relayed spending time at his shrine in Sri Lanka while at other times he reputedly suggested that he was Jilani. His disciples recognize that the Muhaiyaddeen the “reviver”, as mentioned in Rahmat Bibi’s remarks, is what solidifies Bawa’s cosmological state as the *Qutb*. Rahmat Bibi’s labeling of Bawa as the *Qutb* concurrently evokes a broader tradition of Sufism.

The *tariqa* attributed to Jilani is known as the Qadiri (Qadiriyyah) and is often viewed as one of the first *tariqas* to have formed. The traditions of Abdul Qadir Jilani as the “reviver of religion” resulted in numerous poems devoted to him, which acknowledged him as the *Ghauth-i A’zam* (the Greatest Help) or the greatest saint. These poems are recited on his death anniversary, which is celebrated on the fourth month of the Islamic calendar amongst various Sufi communities (Schimmel 1975, 248). This practice is prevalent amongst some Muslims in Sri Lanka, where monthly or even weekly *mawlid*s are held for this saint, not only at shrines devoted to him but in the homes of believers.<sup>356</sup> In highlighting the *mawlid* celebrated at the Fellowship, I considered that this to be a continuation of this tradition from Sri Lanka, second only to the *mawlid* (celebration) of the Prophet Muhammad.

The understanding of Bawa as *Qutb* Muhaiyaddeen that has manifested may be one interpretation of Bawa’s painting of the *Tree of the Prophets* (1978) that is in the Fellowship Headquarters in Philadelphia, as well as the *ashram* in Jaffna and even in the Toronto Branch of

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<sup>356</sup> Please see Chapter 4’s subsection on *Sufism in Sri Lanka* for more discussion on Abdul Qadir Jilani.

the Fellowship.<sup>357</sup> In this painting completed by Bawa, the main branch that forms the central pillar of the painting includes a map of descendants from Adam (bottom of the pillar) to Muhammad (top of the pillar), while vines grow out of the main branch of the prophetic pillar into the leaves, which include other prophets and their families and associated followers. For example Nuh/Noah and his family or Isa/Jesus and Maryam, are part of the leaves that emerge out of the main pillar. The circle that contains the name of Adam forms not only the base of the prophetic pillar, but it is also the center of an additional lineage, one that branches out to the left and right to include seven circles. The seventh circle, larger and in gold point, both on the left and the right contains the name of Abdul Qadir Jilani (Muhaiyaddeen), the six smaller circles in between Adam and Muhaiyaddeen on the left and the right are the different titles of Muhaiyaddeen:

Sayyid ‘Ali ibn Usman Hujwiri

Fakir Muhaiyaddeen

Darwish Muhaiyaddeen

Baba Shah Muhaiyaddeen

Makhdoon Muhaiyaddeen

Khawajah Muhaiyaddeen

Sultan Muhaiyaddeen

Ghaus Muhaiyaddeen

Bawa Muhaiyaddeen

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<sup>357</sup> Though most Sufi communities do institutionalize into *tariqas*, Bawa Muhaiyaddeen left no official lineage. This is not uncommon, as Mohammad in his study of a contemporary Sufi community in South Asia uses the term “uninstitutionalized Sufism” to refer to Sufi groups that do not have a particular traceable Sufi lineage and “[...] ritual frameworks are instead defined by local devotional networks” (Mohammad 2013, 100).

Awliya Muhaiyaddeen

Shaikh Muhaiyaddeen

Sayyid Muhaiyaddeen.

In the *dhikr* recited daily at the *masjid* and the *mazar*, and on Fridays at the Toronto Branch, these names also reappear again in the Fellowship's *dhikr* formula. These titles of Muhaiyaddeen are invoked, though not Hujwiri.

In a discourse given by Bawa on May 18, 1978 at the WBAI Studio in an interview with the Lex Hixon, Bawa speaks about the "True Dimensions of *Dhikr*."<sup>358</sup> In this discourse Bawa states "God (*Andavan*) must pray to God (*Andavan*) for this is *dhikr*" (Muhaiyaddeen 1978). Bawa continues:

Rising from God, it must unite with God and grow in God and move in and out of God. One is his treasure (Man) and God, so there must be a connection. If *dhikr* comes from another place, it is not true prayer. That is the point about the *dhikr*. The benefit is like the sun that shines everywhere, the ray that shines on all things, that is like God, in *dhikr*, it is the power of God that shines everywhere. That is the power of the *dhikr*, God loving God, Man becomes God (May 18, 1978).

Hixon asks Bawa, "How is it done?" Bawa clarifies that he had encountered a guru (whom he never names) that taught him about the point of "Man-God, God-Man."<sup>359</sup> Bawa's guru taught

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<sup>358</sup> Translated by Dr. Ganesan.

<sup>359</sup> In some discourses he has alluded that it was Khidr who taught him this. His first sighting near Kataragama, which is known in Sri Lankan Sufi traditions to be associated with Khidr, has often supported this. Other times he

him that first you must acquire all of *Devam*'s (God's) qualities, his beauty, his speech and light. All of God's qualities need to be perfected and performed resulting in the transcendence of the elements of earth, fire, water, wind and ether (May 18, 1975). The recognition of the Divine Qualities and Names of God plays a crucial role for Bawa, and thus Bawa encouraged this form of *dhikr* (remembrance) of the *asma'ul-husna*, or the ninety-nine names of God. Bawa taught that it is by remembering and meditating on the qualities of Allah that one remembers ones' true self.<sup>360</sup>

The practice of *dhikr*, or the remembrance of Allah through his Names, is an effort to achieve ultimate union.<sup>361</sup> Bawa provided his own interpretation of the names recited in *dhikr*, which has been compiled by the Fellowship in his *Asma'ul Husna: The 99 Beautiful Names of Allah* (1979). In this *dhikr*, the third *kalimah* is recited eleven times in the beginning of the *dhikr*, along with *Surah al-Fatihah* (the Opening) (1), which is repeated twice during *dhikr*. *Surah al-Ikhlās* (the Sincerity) (112) is repeated four times during *dhikr*:

In the name of God, most Merciful, most Compassionate.

Say: He is God, the One and Only

God, the Eternal, Absolute

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has suggested this knowledge has come from Abdul Qadir Jilani, especially as he is said to have spent eleven years meditating at Daftar Jailani, which is dedicated to Abdul Qadir Jilani. These are only speculations; it is difficult to confirm who this "guru" might be.

<sup>360</sup> His qualities are sometimes referred to as the three thousand qualities of God, see Muhaiyaddeen, *Asma'ul-Husna: the 99 Beautiful Names of Allah* (1979).

<sup>361</sup> Similar traditions of negation of the I or self-annihilation are also found in Tamil Sufi literature such as by the Sufi *shaykh* Muhayyaddin Maluk Mudaliya, known as Kottar Gnaniar (1167-1209 A.H). This negation of the ego-self, or the I becomes the ultimate purpose of the *dhikr* for in achieving this, according to Bawa and similar to that expressed by Kottar Gnaniar, the outcome is the realization of non-dualism, the original state of all creation. His main work is the *Meignana Thirupadattirattu* in the year A.H. 1316. In the introduction to this study, he had met a disciple of Hallaj from whom he received initiation and was influenced in the tradition of "*ana la-Haqq*" (Sahbdeen 1986, 86).

He beggetteth not, nor is He begotten

And there is none like unto Him.

Amin.<sup>362</sup>

This *surah* points to the theological understanding of absolute unity and emanation of creation from one being, as it is intrinsic to the Qur'an itself (112:1-4). It is essential to Bawa's teachings. Michael Sells (1996)<sup>363</sup> writes:

[...] the ground of Qur'anic revelation is the affirmation of divine unity. The Sufis engaged in a sophisticated meditation on the various meanings of such unity; using a variety of terms for unity: *ahadiyya*, *wahdaniyya*, *wahadiyya* all based on the Arabic root for "one": a(w)/h/d. A related key term is *tawhid*, which refers to the activity of affirming divine unity. The most famous Qur'anic passage of *tawhid* is among the short *suras* of the Qur'an [*Sura al-Ikhlās*]. In this passage, Allah is affirmed as one, as not begetting, and as not begotten, and *as samad*, an enigmatic term in classical Arabic, with connotations of perdurance and indestructibility (1996, 45).

*Surah al-Falaq* (the Daybreak) (113)<sup>364</sup> and *Surah an-Nas* (the Mankind) (114)<sup>365</sup> are both declared once during and at the end of *dhikr*.<sup>366</sup> The following invocation to Abdul Qadir Jilani is repeated eleven times during *dhikr*, while the others are only invoked once:

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<sup>362</sup> I have used the translations of the *surahs* as found in the *dhikr* pamphlet of the Fellowship, to keep with their understanding of what is being reciting.

<sup>363</sup> Michael Sells is the John Henry Barrows Professor of Islamic History and Literature at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. He studies and teaches on Qur'anic studies, Sufism, Arabic and Islamic love poetry, mysticism and religion and violence.

*Ya Baghdadiy Shaikh Sultan Fakir Muhaiyaddeen ‘Abdul-Qadiril-Jilani, radiyallahu’  
anh* [O Baghdadi, King of Shaikhs, Pauper Muhaiyaddeen, slave of the Almighty,  
‘Abdul-Qadiril-Jilani, may Allah be pleased with him] (Muhaiyaddeen 1996, 6-9).<sup>367</sup>

Bawa’s namesake of Muhaiyaddeen, is steeped within his discourses of Abdul Qadir Jilani, the *Muhyi ud-din*, the ‘reviver of religion,’ an understanding of Bawa that is seen repeated by disciples of Bawa, such as Rahmat Bibi, but also is found in ritual contexts, such as *dhikr*. Disciples of Bawa ascribe contrasting approaches to what constitutes the *Qutb*. Thus far, there was some correlation highlighted both in practice and description (by Rahmat Bibi) of the *Qutb* with Abdul Qadir Jilani, for others the *Qutb* is a far more cosmological principle.

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<sup>364</sup> This *surah* is: In the name of God, most merciful, most compassionate  
Say: I seek refuge with the Lord of dawn  
From the mischief of created things  
From the mischief of darkness as it overspreads  
From the mischief of those who practice secret arts  
And from the mischief of the envious one as he practices envy.  
Amin.

<sup>365</sup> This *surah* is: In the name of God, most merciful, most compassionate.  
Say: I seek refuge with the Lord and Cherisher of mankind.  
The king, or ruler of mankind  
The God, or judge of mankind.  
From the mischief of the whisper of evil,  
the same who whispers into the hearts of mankind.  
Among *jinns* and men.  
Amin.

<sup>366</sup> For Bawa these recitations have an esoteric significance. For instance, he explains the *surah* is the body. It is made of twenty-eight letters. They are the “*Alhamdu*” [Heart of Praise]. The twenty-eight letters of the body is the Qur’an and that is the “*Suratul-Qur’an*” (the Inner Form of the Qur’an), which is the “*Suratul-Insan*” (the Inner Form of Man) (Muhaiyaddeen 1978, 136). This pure life driven by *iman* is the manifestation of the human being’s return to the beginning of all creation at which moment the soul was united with the Creator. It is also at this *maqam* (state) when the *qalb*, or “heart within the heart,” is in the state of Consciousness of Divine Analytic Wisdom where “the Heart and Throne of the True Believer” belongs to Allah that one is in a state of true *iman* (Muhaiyaddeen 1976, 198). This inward reality is dependent on the vision of the *qalb* (heart).

<sup>367</sup> I have kept the transliteration and translation as found in the *dhikr* booklet so as not to create any confusion.

### *The Primal Qutb*

This *Qutb*, however, is not only understood as the *Qutb* of the times, rather for some Bawa is understood as the primal *Qutb*, the one whose *nur* (light) was formed second only to the Prophet Muhammad in the time before time. Nur Sharon Marcus is a poet and author. She met Bawa when he visited Toronto in 1974. She is currently one of the Executive Members of the Toronto Fellowship Branch. She has published extensively on her experiences with Bawa. When I asked her who Bawa was, she explained:

I can't use the past tense because he is, if you want to know who Bawa Muhaiyaddeen really is, you have to know that this Muhaiyaddeen has always been and will always be. At the time of creation when the *nur* separated, that radiant resplendence that divine plentitude of Allah separated from Allah and was the first thing that spoke and Allah looked at the *nur*, this is before any creation, this is in the time frame that Bawa calls *anathi*, the time before the primal beginning at that time, when the *nur* separated, there was like an agitation in totality which was the existence of everything, the *Nur* separated from the rest, and Allah looked at the *Nur* and said "who are you?" And the *Nur* said "I am the light which existed within you. I have always existed within you." After that there was a shadow that separated from the *nur* and that which separated from the *nur* was the *qutb* that the resonance of divine wisdom- so there is the light and wisdom, which have come directly from Allah. We have each of us, within us, that recognition of that perfect note, which is that light and that resonance.<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>368</sup> Nur Sharon Marcus, interview with author, home of interviewee, Toronto, Canada October 10, 2013.



This *nur* (light) that separated from *nur* of Muhammad, was the Muhaiyaddeen or the *Awwal Qutb* (primal or first axial pole). Bawa (Muhaiyaddeen) as the *nur* that manifested from the creation of *Nur* Muhammad was repeated to me several times when speaking with his diverse disciples.

Shoaib is a devotee of Bawa who came to the Fellowship after Bawa's physical passing through an encounter with one of Bawa's senior disciples. He is originally from Pakistan, but lives in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and visits Toronto and Philadelphia regularly. Shoaib and his family were part of the pilgrims I travelled with in Sri Lanka during my fieldwork. When I connected with Shoaib again in Toronto a few months after our travels together in Sri Lanka, I asked him who Bawa was and he expressed the following:

Bawa is the part of the original *nur* the light the original light that emanated from God, the light that emanated from God is what we believe in mysticism is the light of Muhammad, not Muhammad as a person not prophet but the light, the light of Muhammad, that was the first creation in the world, God was in a state of darkness, and the light emerged from it within that light another light emerged from it. One is light of God and the other is the wisdom of God. The light of God was personified as the last prophet as Muhammad, the wisdom, has been there from day one, okay in different forms, even Muhammad has been there in different forms, we don't know what these forms are, but Bawa is the wisdom, he is the one who taught Adam in Jailani in Sri Lanka for twelve years how to till the land, how to you know to provide shelter for himself and so he is the wisdom. He has been appearing and reappearing and appearing and

reappearing and appearing and reappearing this was his last manifestation, now he won't come again, okay- in that form.<sup>369</sup>

In Shoaib's explanation the Prophet Muhammad is understood as a timeless figure, but the timeless Bawa (i.e., the essence) is a "light" that emerged from the timeless Muhammad, which are both emanations of the one reality, Allah. In a discourse given on June 26, 1982, Bawa speaks of the "Nine Muhammads" as opposed to a historical Muhammad, the latter which the world know as the son of Aminah and Abdullah. The "Nine Muhammads" according to Bawa are cosmological, timeless and universal states of consciousness. These include

1. *Anathi* Muhammad (Muhammad within Allah or unmanifested)
2. *Athi* Muhammad (beginning of creation or the manifested)
3. *Awwal* Muhammad (comes into creation, soul comes out)
4. *Hayat* Muhammad (the eternal, soul or life)
5. *An'am* [*anna*] Muhammad (the nourishment and comes as food, as earth, fire, water, air and ether)
6. *Ahamad* (the beautiful light form in the heart or *qalb*)
7. Muhammad (as beauty of the light of Allah, in his heart and reflected in his face)
8. Nur Muhammad (the wisdom, radiates Allah's essence) and
9. Allah Muhammad (the light of Allah within Muhammad and the light of Muhammad within Allah).<sup>370</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> Shoaib, interview with author, Bay and Bloor Plaza, downtown Toronto, Canada, October 9, 2013.

<sup>370</sup> For more of these descriptions as developed by Dr. Ganesan and editors please see pages 710-712 of *The Resonance of Allah* (2001).

For Bawa, when one speaks of Muhammad, one must be cognizant of the historical personage as solely a manifestation of the cosmological Muhammad.<sup>371</sup> Mauroof explains this teaching of Bawa's clearly when he writes:

On the one hand we are given a picture of the prophet that emphasizes the intermediary role of the prophet in a chain of historical events. That picture is consonant with the Biblical and Qur'anic picture of prophets. On the other hand we have a picture of the prophets and their communities of all times as part of a universal consciousness, over and beyond the space-time orientated consciousness of the world (Mauroof 1976, 219).<sup>372</sup>

Bawa's reference of Muhammad was also one that was steeped in the principal understanding of the primordial creation of Muhammad as the *Nur* Muhammad, teachings that both Nur Sharon Marcus and Shoaib are evoking in their readings of who Bawa is, because according to their interpretations, the *Qutb* emanates from the light of the primordial Muhammad. These metaphysical correlations are essential in solidifying Bawa as an *insan kamil*, as it is the Prophet Muhammad in Islam who becomes the paragon of this state. This is further explored in subsections of this chapter.

The significance of the *Nur* Muhammad, as the archetypical human being for Bawa is a state of realization and the point of access to wisdom. In the teachings of Bawa, the *nabi*

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<sup>371</sup> These discourses are gathered in the book *The Song of Muhammad* (1996).

<sup>372</sup> In her cosmological and metaphysical study *Sufi Expressions of the Mystic Quest* (1976), Laleh Bakhtiar explains, "unity of being" through the primal tenet of the Sufi expression "there is no god but God" (*La ilaha illa'llah*) and "Muhammad is the Prophet of God" (*Muhammad rasula'llah*) (9). The first, she writes, "expresses the concept of the Unity of Being which annihilates all multiplicity, all separate entities...[while the second tenet] expresses the concept of the Universal Prototype (most often translated as the Universal Man)" (9) underlining both unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity.

(prophet) represents the manner in which any human being can achieve the state of unity with the divine and become the universal prototype, the perfect being or the *insan kamil*. Bawa teaches with these prophetic figures to stress that these individuals have bonded with Allah because of their beauty of their *qulub* (hearts), a state of beauty that always has been accessible to humanity but has been lost in the recent age of earthly desires (Muhaiyaddeen 1979).<sup>373</sup>

*Nur* Muhammad who existed in *arwah* (the divine kingdom) is the *satguru*, the divine teacher, for while our source of “awareness” comes from *Nur* Muhammad our “wisdom” comes from the *Qutb* Muhaiyaddeen, who is then Bawa Muhaiyaddeen (the guru, *shaykh* and *Qutb*) to many of his disciples. For his disciples, such as for Nur Sharon Marcus, Bawa as the Muhaiyaddeen harkens back to the beginning of cosmological existence, when even prior to creation there emanated the first *nur* (Muhammad) and then another light, which was wisdom, associated with Muhaiyaddeen, the *Qutb* and the essence of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen. For Shoaib, Bawa as *Qutb* Muhaiyaddeen is regionally dependent on hagiographical oral traditions of the Prophet Adam and the Baghdadi saint Abdul Qadir Jilani in Sri Lanka, and thus presents the lineage of Bawa, the *Qutb*. Both Nur and Shoaib articulate that the primordial essence of Bawa is not limited to the physical “Bawa” they encountered.

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<sup>373</sup> Bawa recalls the holy figures of the Abrahamic traditions as exemplars for humanity in their own path to God in his teachings. In relaying stories of prophets such as Musa (Moses), Isa (Jesus) or Muhammad, Bawa used these prophetic figures as models for the journey of the *insan* to become *insan kamil*. He also incorporated multiple layers of understanding to his renditions of stories of the prophets. His retelling of the story of Khidr *nabi* and Musa in *The Guidebook* (1976, 37-57) is such an example.

*The Qutb as the “Universal Consciousness”*

For some members of the Fellowship, the *Qutb* is understood as a universal state of being, as opposed to a cosmological creative principle, a symbol of a mystical lineage or even an intermediary between Hindu and Sufi way of life. For Hanal Thambi, Bawa’s title of the *Qutb* meant that it was based on a state of “formlessness”:

So it has to have an effect on us. So he’s looking at the thing that has an effect on us and studying that as well. But [...] I was sitting in his room and then he called me over to his bed. I think there might have only been like two or three people. And he said to me [...] he said “I could be your father, I could be your mother, I could be your guru.” He went through a whole list of roles that he could be. Father, mother, guru, *shaykh* [...] you know, all that stuff and then [...] he said “I could be whatever you need me to be.” And then at the end he said “I could also be your friend” as the last thing and that’s what he said. So in terms of role, he is all those roles depending on what I’m needing because if you’re formless [...] he’s the form of formlessness. The *Qutb*. I don’t know how much [...] there has to be [...] even though he’s in a body, the *Qutb*, by definition, is formless. So if you’re formless, that means you can take on any form.<sup>374</sup>

For Hanal Thambi Bawa as the *Qutb* was understood as a testament to his formlessness. Bawa could be what each disciple needed, be it a parental figure, friend or teacher. In this particular interpretation of the *Qutb*, it is the versatility to be what one needed that defined Bawa as the

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<sup>374</sup> Hanal Thambi, interview with author, the garden of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 12, 2014.

*Qutb*. This formlessness also signals to his transcendence above the physicality, making him an ever-present reality for some members, like Hanal Thambi.

In a similar way for Rick Boardman, the *Qutb* is not necessarily a cosmological or theological designation, as suggested by Nur or Shoaib above, but rather the *Qutb* is one who has reached a state of complete annihilation of the self, wherein the lower self and ego (i.e., “I”) no longer exists:

A realized human being is one who has gone through a process of rigorous discipline and self work and so forth and finally by the grace of Allah been permitted to become a channel for that power. The *Qutb*, you see, is traditionally the axis of the moral universe. What does that mean? It means that he has emptied himself to the point, the point [taps on table] where on earth that power is able to come and be radiated out. Not because of who he is; his body is a body like any other body. His personality was like any other personality. His hunger, disease, old age and death are ever present and ever evident but he got himself out of the way and became a channel for That power.<sup>375</sup>

Boardman’s sees Bawa as any other human being, but what distinguishes Bawa as a *Qutb* was that he was able to get his lower self or the “I”, “out of the way.” His understanding of Bawa as the *Qutb* is similar to that of Mauroof in his dissertation. Mauroof states that the “Bawa in his teachings also presents Muhaiyaddeen as being synonymous with a kind of knowledge potentially present within the human self, i.e., as a human psychic characteristic” or a “consciousness” (1976, 38). It forms part of the seven states, of which the sixth represents the

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<sup>375</sup> Rick Boardman, interview with author at interviewee’s home, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 14, 2014.

state of the *Qutb*.<sup>376</sup> The “psychological” *Qutb* (as the consciousness) is one in the same as the “mythological Muhaiyaddeen” referred to by his disciples, such as spoken of by Nur or Shoaib. They both are referents to the mystical states of Bawa and also state that Bawa taught his disciples to aspire to (Mauroof 1976, 36). It is here that one sees the complementary approaches to the term *Qutb* implored by the various members of the Fellowship, the *Qutb* (as “reviver” of faith) and the light that emanated from the first light (Prophet Muhammad) to state of being accessible to humanity because it is a “universal consciousness” (Mauroof 1976, 219).

A similar sentiment of the universal consciousness espoused by the state of the *Qutb* is suggested by Musa Muhaiyaddeen,<sup>377</sup> one of the current presidents of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship in Philadelphia and author of several books, such as the *Elixir of Truth: Journey on the Sufi Path* (2013). He explained that:

[...] consciousness doesn't necessary have a name, but we have given it names. The consciousness that was that came at around the year zero was labeled Jesus. The consciousness that came around the year 642 or something like that was labeled Muhammad. But the consciousness that was Jesus may have also been the consciousness that was called Bawa. The consciousness that was as Muhammad may have been labeled Bawa, the consciousness that was Abdul Qadir Jilani may have been labeled Bawa. I don't know nor want to conjecture. For some to label Bawa as having Muhammad in consciousness would be

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<sup>376</sup> It is in such discussions of Bawa's philosophy and metaphysics that one begins to see similarities between Bawa's teachings and Jilani's philosophy, such as that of the “seven states.” Elsewhere Bawa also discusses colours, and temperatures as notable in Jilani's own framework. Future studies should compare these two teachers' traditions, and explore the degree to which Jilani's teachings influenced Bawa and how they manifested in Tamil Sufism.

<sup>377</sup> Musa Muhaiyaddeen also has a website in which his discourses are published, he speaks at various Sufi conferences across the world such as the International Association of Sufism founded by Seyyedeh Dr. Nahid Angha and Shah Nazar Dr. Ali Kianfar in 1983. Musa Muhaiyaddeen's website is <http://www.thewitnesswithin.com> (Accessed June 7, 2014).

blasphemous. For some to label Bawa as having Jesus consciousness would be blasphemous and *shirk*, which means innovation or outside the belief system of the religion. So it is difficult to talk about things with words, which are beyond words because it is a form of game playing that occupies this world.<sup>378</sup>

For Musa Muhaiyaddeen, this consciousness of universality is based on its connection with the prophetic figures of the Abrahamic traditions. He carefully navigates the difficulty of linking the *Qutb* consciousness with prophetic states, but he is still alluding to the continual tradition of the prophetic figures, one that is maintained by Bawa as the *Qutb*. From what has been charted thus far, Bawa as the spiritual leader was culturally and religiously situated as a guru, Sufi *shaykh* and ultimately a cosmological being of *Qutb*, that was not only metaphysically or historically oriented but also presented a particular geographically oriented sacred lineage to Sri Lanka. It is also concurrently an entity that was formless and a universal consciousness. In essence, this versatility of states of being is then dependent on Bawa modelling what it is to be the perfected human being, the *insan al-kamil* according to his disciples.

#### *Bawa as the Insan al-Kamil*

Farokh is a Shi'a Muslim from Iran who immigrated to Toronto in early 1990s and is currently one of the Executive Members of the Toronto Branch. As a young teenager in Toronto, he became affiliated with the Jerrahi Sufi Community in west-end Toronto, where he met Wilhelm

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<sup>378</sup> Musa Muhaiyaddeen, interview with author at the home of the interviewee, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014.



Poolman, the central leader of the Toronto Branch until his passing. It was through him that he learned about Bawa and his Fellowship. When I asked him who Bawa was, he explained:

An example [...] of the ultimate state of a human being, of who you can be, of a man, of a human being to be, that is who Bawa is, in physical form. Now his station, or who was, is something known only to God. We call him a *Qutb*, we call him a *shaykh* you know. We have given him titles and he has never said anything, you know. He calls himself an ant-man; you have heard him say that. And I think to me Bawa is, his being is the ultimate state that a man can attain in a lifetime, beyond that like I said it's, I don't know. It is not my area [laughing].<sup>379</sup>

As explained by Farokh, Bawa did not give himself titles. At most, he referred to himself simply as the “ant-man.”<sup>380</sup> It is the ultimate state of being, emblematic of the ideal state that any human being can achieve, that Bawa represents for Farokh. It is for this reason that interpretations of Bawa as the guru, the *shaykh* and the *Qutb* are all encapsulated in the understanding that he is the perfected being, or the *insan al-kamil*.

Roshan Jamal,<sup>381</sup> also an Executive Member of the Toronto Branch and an active member in the Toronto Muslim community, articulated the following about Bawa:

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<sup>379</sup> Farokh, interview with author, Starbucks, Toronto, Canada, November 18, 2013.

<sup>380</sup> In a discourse given by Bawa at St. Peter's Church in New York City, on May 18, 1975, he explains that he is unlettered, unschooled and as usual begins his discourses by pleading first for forgiveness from the audience for any shortcomings, stating “I do not know religions and philosophies, I am a very tiny man, I am smaller than an ant I am still learning and I am here to share with you some of what I have learned” (Muhaiyaddeen 1975). Bawa may be using imagery from the *Surah an-Naml* (27) or *The Ant*.

<sup>381</sup> Roshan grew up in India and Malawi, but has been in Canada for the majority of her life where she has been an activist within the Toronto Muslim community. From 2003-2005 she headed the Noor Cultural Centre in Toronto, becoming one of the first Muslim woman in Canada to be the leader of a Muslim institution. She went on to establish the Dawn Foundation, which supports and promotes education at the local level to help train leadership

[...] Bawa is what God represents. What God represents is God's qualities. And the scriptures say that. The Qur'an says that, you know when you look at the creation, when you say God is mercy, his beauty, his patience, the fact that God reveals 6666 verses saying the same thing tells us his quality of patience. Right, those are all qualities of God. The beauty that is in the creation, in human beings that was who Bawa was in real person, you know he represented those qualities. So he was the qualities of God. You know if you can see, if you were to see God in person, he might be something like that.<sup>382</sup>

For Jamal, Bawa manifests the qualities of God, qualities that are associated with the Names of God or the *Asma al-Husna* (99 Names of Allah). In Bawa's "Change to *Insan Kamil* the Direct Connection" (1979) it was this aspect of the *qalb* (gnostic heart)<sup>383</sup> that he felt that humanity neglected. Bawa understood that in the past, humanity was not concerned with the beautification of outer form or obsessed with material gain. Instead the human being, the *insan*, beautified his/her *qalb* so that the heart had a strong bond and relationship with Allah and remained united

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authorities in Muslim public spaces. In 2010, her foundation helped introduce a Muslim presence at Emmanuel College at the University of Toronto. And now runs a part-time two-year Canadian Certificate program in Muslim studies at the same university. In 2011, the same foundation paved the pathway to establish a Muslim Scholar in Islamic tract in the existing Masters of Pastoral Services at Emmanuel College. For her continual work in Toronto and its Muslim communities, Roshan Jamal was awarded the Canadian Muslim Women who Inspire Award in 2012.

<sup>382</sup> Roshan Jamal, interview with author, home of interviewee, Toronto, Canada. December 18, 2013.

<sup>383</sup> The *qalb*, according to Sufis such as al-Hallaj (d. 922), is the essential aspect of the human being. Reynold A. Nicholson, the English orientalist and scholar of Islamic literature and mysticism, wrote, "the intellect cannot gain real knowledge of God, [but] the *qalb* is capable of knowing the essences of all things, and when illumined by faith and knowledge reflects the whole content of the divine mind" (Nicholson 1914, 68). It is this inward vision of the heart that is at first "blind to celestial glory until the dark obstruction of the phenomenal self with all its sensual contaminations has been wholly cleared away," a process that is completed by God but needs the "in-ward co-operation" of the human being (Nicholson 1963, 70). The knowledge acquired is not that of ordinary knowledge (*ilm*) but rather of *ma'rifat* and *irfan* (gnosis) that "is unification, [and the] realization of the fact that the appearance of 'otherness' beside Oneness is a false and deluding dream" (Nicholson 1963, 70-85). The heart is then figured as the "battlefield on which the armies of God and the Devil contend for victory [...] through one gate, the heart receives immediate knowledge of God [and] through another it lets in the illusions of sense" (1914, 68).

with all His qualities. It is this beauty as ideally manifested and reflecting the true Beauty of God (*jamal*) that Jamal articulates is representative of who Bawa is. He is the one who brings forth God's qualities of "mercy, his beauty and his patience."

According to Bawa, human beings are made up of two sections the *zahir* (outer) and the *batin* (inner). The outside form, or body, is often referred to as the shirt (body) and represents damaging qualities of arrogance, karma and *maya* (illusions) that must be overcome. The shirt contains "four fangs" with "seven kinds of poisons" or *shaktis* (energies) and can be signified by the five elements of earth, water, air, ether and fire, associated with arrogance, *karma*, *maya* and Satan. These five elements are also part of what Bawa refers to as the nine precious stones: earth, fire, water, air, ether, mind, desire, wisdom and the soul. Bawa elaborates: of these nine precious stones "wisdom is the gem, the soul is the light, and the rest are the body" (Muhaiyaddeen 1979, 5). It is for this reason that Bawa compares the human beings to animals, these qualities are the basis of the shared qualities between human beings and the animals: the five elements of creation (May 18, 1975). This similarity with the "beasts" should prompt human beings to question, "What is the difference between man and animal?" To which Bawa responds that the central point of difference that elevates human beings above the animals is wisdom (*arivu*): "to be able to differentiate, which is night, which is day, which is light, which is night, which is hell, what is heaven, which is true and false, which is tasty and not tasty, to know this is the wisdom man has. Where was I before, where am I now? What is this body made of?" (May 18, 1975). Therefore, the body and the qualities associated with it must be transcended and humanity's purpose is to "return to [their] original state of beauty" (Muhaiyaddeen 1979, 5).

Bawa teaches that the goal of the human being is to search within him or herself. It is only by returning to one's primordial state in which all illusions, or *nafs* (lower base desires), are

destroyed that one can perform the duty set by Allah (1979, 11). The self consists of seven qualities of the body - falsehood, murder, theft, sex, intoxicants, miserliness and envy – and seven qualities of the mind including egoism, attachment, anger, lust, maya, karma and arrogance (1979, 113). It is upon transcending these negative qualities of the body and mind that the *insan* becomes the *insan al-kamil*.

The way to achieve this state of *insan al-kamil* is through a process of analysis, filtering, separation and re-filtering. Bawa also refers to these steps as a “beautifying” process- beautifying one’s inner self by which one merges with Allah (Muhaiyaddeen 1978, 1979). He adds that one must analyze the worlds that exist within the body, the beasts that exists within the body, various animal qualities, such as arrogance and desires, and separate them from the elements (earth, water, air, ether and fire) and filter them from illusion (1976).<sup>384</sup> The purpose of this analysis and filtration process is to determine their various uses after which “man can use these as instruments throughout the universe” (1976, 102). The last process of re-filtering, or wiping clean the mirror of the soul, constitutes “man’s most important duty” (*dharma*) and requires man to “filter and re-filter himself so that he may discover himself” (1976, 103). When the steps of research and analysis are complete, the human being within him/herself climbs through seven layers of wisdom (*arivu*), in the following ascending order:

### 1. Perception (*unarvu*)

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<sup>384</sup> These elements itself represent various qualities and are associated with particular angelic or prophetic beings within the Abrahamic and Hindu traditions. Earth, which contains four hundred trillion ten thousand poisons is often represented with Adam and Eve (Paravadi) (T) and Hawwa. Water is connected with the *devi* or spirit *Gangadevi* or the archangel Mikael and contains one thousand and eight poisonous forces. Air is connected to the spirit *Vayubagavan* or the archangel Izrafil and contains two thousand one hundred and twenty-eight poisonous forces or energies. Finally, fire is associated with the spirit of *Akkinibagavan* or Izraeel, the archangel of death, and contains one thousand and eight poisonous forces that include *jinns* (spirits), fairies and Satan as well as arrogance, egoism, pride and jealousy (Muhaiyaddeen 1976).

2. Awareness (*unarchi*)
3. Intellect (*puthi*)
4. Assessment (*mathi*)
5. Wisdom (*arivu*) (sometimes associated with the state of Khidr)
6. Divine Analytic Wisdom (*Pahuth-Arivu*) (T) (sometimes associated with the state of Jesus/Isa or *Qutb* Muhaiyaddeen)
7. Divine Luminous Wisdom (*Per-Arivu*) (T) (state of Nur Muhammad)<sup>385</sup>

Through this analysis the aspirant realizes that human beings and animals share the first three levels of consciousness, that is animals have perception, awareness and intellect, they eat, urinate and sleep but they do not know the difference between right and wrong (May 18, 1975). In this regard, human beings are “created in the ocean of maya” which is not a proper building block and it is only when “wisdom is realized can man be called man, otherwise he is a beast” (Muhaiyaddeen May 18, 1975).

For Bawa the perfect being embodies the compassion of Allah or *Andavan* (God) to all creation, regardless of religious creed, race, gender or any other forms of division. The perfect being represents Islam, which for Bawa was understood as the embodiment of *anbu* or *ishq* (love) of the inner heart. This *anbu* is to be personified in actions towards fellow human beings. The *insan al-kamil*'s honoured position both in God and His creation is due to the Reality of his Being, a Reality that is the Ultimate Reality itself and dependent on being in the world. When this potential is reached one becomes the microcosm (small world) of the macrocosm (universe).

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<sup>385</sup> Mauroof also adds that the seventh state of consciousness was associated with *nur* Muhammad, the sixth associated with *qutb* Muhaiyaddeen, while this state was also related to Murukan (Mauroof 1976, 87-88).

Bawa's teaching of the *insan al-kamil* has not developed within a vacuum, but rather is a central principle in Sufi cosmology. In classical Sufism *al-insan al-kamal*, or *insan kamil*, is commonly translated as the perfect being, the servant or the universal being in Islamic mysticism (Buckhardt 1959, 1979; Izutsu 1983; Baldick 1989; Schimmel 1992; Chittick 2000, 2005; Dagli 2004). In this doctrine the human being is positioned as the isthmus between Allah (God) and the cosmos (Chittick 2000). A mirror that reflects *tawhid* (unity) and the *barzakh* (interface) between God and the world, an *insan al-kamil* is the perfected being who preserves the existence of the universe (Baldick 1989). In Sufism, it is the Prophet Muhammad who is emblematic of this state of being.

Annemarie Schimmel (1985) writes “as the *insan kamil*, the Perfect Man, Muhammad is as it were the suture between the Divine and the created world; he is, so to speak, the *barzakh*, the isthmus between the Necessary and contingent existence” (134). This worldly contingency is as mystics, such as Ibn ‘Arabi, have surmised is the “manifested principle” so that the *rasul* (the messenger) is the “manifesting principle” and Allah the “Principle in Itself” (Schimmel 1985, 135). This can be paralleled to Bawa's outline of understanding of the “nine Muhammads” noted above for they extend beyond the historical personage to an interpretation that necessitates the universal principle is only a reflection of the one principle. As Julian Baldick (1989)<sup>386</sup> explains

The First or Universal Intelligence of the Greek philosophers is identified with Muhammad's inner reality (*haqiqa*), with the Spirit, and with much else besides. For Muhammadan Reality is also the ‘Perfect Man’ (*al-insan al-kamil*), the mystic who is

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<sup>386</sup> Before his retirement in 2007, Baldick was Reader in the Study of Religions at King's College London. He is the author of *Black God: The Asiatic Roots of Jewish, Christian and Muslims Religions* (1997), *Mystical Islam: An Introduction* (new edition, 2012) and *Animal and Shaman: Ancient Religions of Central Asia* (new edition, 2012).

perfected not in an ethical sense but as encompassing all of God's attributes. Such a man unites God with the world, not as a bridge but as an interface (*barzakh*), the imperceptible border between shadow and light. It is for the sake of such a Perfect Man that the Universe has come into being. So the Perfect Man alone Preserves the existence of the Universe (84).

The mystical Muhammad has been associated with the "Universal Intellect" or the Knowledge, that Baldick speaks of above, such traditions assert that Muhammad was the first creation before time and thus the last prophet to manifest on earth (Schimmel 1985, 134).<sup>387</sup> Bawa himself uses similar traditions in his own cosmology, as I highlighted from his understandings of the "nine Muhammads" and his teachings on the mystical Muhammad and Muhaiyaddeen that are being utilized by his varying disciples. It is the esoteric presentations of the *Qutb*, as a being that is transcendental and eternal, that places this concept both within a particular Islamic milieu (especially in the lineage of Abdul Qadir Jilani) but also within the realm of a universal consciousness. The tradition of *insan al-kamil* is at the heart of Sufism. It forms the basis for acts of piety and rituals such as the *mawlid*s, that honor holy figures such as the Prophet Muhammad, and his saints, such as Abdul Qadir Jilani, as perfected beings and thus beyond time.<sup>388</sup> Bawa's discourses are immersed within this same tradition of Sufism, but for his disciples, Bawa himself is given these titles as the *insan kamil*. Thus transforming the historical figure of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen into a universal state of being and saint of God.

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<sup>387</sup> Fariduddin Attar of Nishapur (d.1220) known for his hagiographies of Sufi saints and his seminal flight narrative of *The Conference of the Birds* understands this primordial manifestation of *Nur Muhammad* as the *Haqqia Muhammadiyya*, or the "Muhammadan Reality"- a reality that makes Muhammad the primordial creation which endows him with the role and status as the seal of the prophets. Prophet Muhammad is signified as the "prototype of the prototype" or *logos* (divine word) and thus the true *qutb* (pole) (Arberry 1950, 93).

<sup>388</sup> For a discussion of *mawlid*s, especially at the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship please see Chapter 2.

Bawa presents his own understandings of what his given names signify:

Bawa means father, a title given to someone who is a father of wisdom for all mankind. Muhaiyaddeen is a name given to the *Qutb*, the being who brings the divine explanation, who has perfect wisdom. The name Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen is a name of light which was given to the *Qutb*; it is just one of his titles. Muhammad means the primal Light which came as a gift from God to all mankind. Raheem is the name of the being who uncovers the primal Light and reveals it. This means that Bawa is the primal father of mankind emanating from the primal Light which is then made manifest. Muhaiyaddeen is the name given by Allah to one who has received the pure Light of God. He is the one who gives the light of wisdom, the clarity of *iman*, of faith, certitude and determination to the heart of man. That is the meaning of the names, which are given only to someone who has the qualities of these names. The names must be appropriate for that person, and that person must be a father for all mankind. He must have the capacity to give peace to the hearts of his children, he must guide these children along the right path with the benevolence of the *din*, the path of perfect purity, and he must make them understand the difference between *halal* and *haram*, what is permitted and what is not. When all the names work together in unity, with perfect qualities, the name Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen is appropriate for that person (Muhaiyaddeen July 25, 1983).

In this particular explanation, Bawa unpacks each of his given names. In it he uses: Muhammad (“primal light”), Raheem (compassionate, the one who “uncovers” the Light), Bawa (the “primal



father”) and Muhaiyaddeen (“received” from God the light). Though one may comprehend these names as culturally, religiously and linguistically connected to particular milieus (i.e., Islam or Sri Lanka), for Bawa he implores an esoteric interpretation of his names that elucidates their meanings beyond forms. Bawa in the above discourse on his own self-ascribed names, signals to a comprehensive approach to the various appellations utilized by him and subsequently implored by his devotees. When the names of Bawa and the titles given to him by his disciples are seen as a whole, one begins to capture a plurality of names and titles that is reflected in his ministry and spaces seen throughout this study.

One of the challenges in assessing the timeless Bawa is that it presents numerous “Bawas.” Even Mauroof, both as a disciple of Bawa and an anthropologist, in his early study struggled to identify Bawa and fluctuated from perceiving him as a mystic, a prophet, an “object of veneration” and an “Islamic reformer” while trying to account for his Tamil linguistical tradition that supposedly associated Bawa with Saivite or Vaishnavite Hinduism (1976, 221, 247). Some of Bawa’s disciples, as noted above, revered him as a guru, swami, *shaykh*, *Qutb* and someone who perhaps was a manifestation God, both in a Hindu context but also in a Sufi context of complete self-annihilation of the ego. In this regard, it is fair to use Mauroof’s term of Bawa being “polysemic.” For this signals the broad spectrum of the titles that range from swami to *Qutb*. It is precisely this state of non-being, or perhaps multiple beings (polysemic) that forms the basis of the common denominator of Bawa’s diverse ways of being. The unity that gurus and *shaykhs* were said to have perfected and attempted to teach their own students, the ability to be expansive and particular, to be the point where two or more systems/selves meet. Bawa and his numerous honorifics signal to the interface of his own being, one that is then reflected in his ministries encountered already in previous sections. The pluralism espoused in his followers and

subsequent ministries is a testament to the pluralism of Bawa's own being. The latter is what Bawa represents and this is the story of who Bawa is, timeless or otherwise.

During my interviews with members of the Fellowship, I often concluded our conversations with the answer Bawa gave when visitors asked Bawa who he was, Bawa would reply, "find out who you are." So when I asked members of the Fellowship this question, *who are you*, I received the culmination of Bawa's teachings in their responses and perhaps no one disciple illustrated this response more expressively than a member named Captain. Captain met Bawa during his visit to Toronto when he was giving a talk at the University of Toronto. At the time, she was involved in a yoga group, but she eventually gave up this practice and moved to Philadelphia to be with Bawa, and even visited him in Sri Lanka. Since the beginning of her time at the Fellowship, she has been involved in the transcription and publication of Bawa's discourses at the Fellowship, work that she continues now as service to Bawa and the Fellowship. At the conclusion of our interview when I asked her "who are you?" She replied:

Um, well who am I is the question. Who am I, why am I here, where am I going? I mean those are the questions because you know I think I'm a light of God. I do, and I think Bawa helped turn on the switch to make that light shine, you know, I think I was basically who I was when I met him. I was thirty something when I met him so I was already formed. I had a sense of humour, I have a kind nature, but I think that he made me strive to have more understanding of the human condition, not be so judgemental, not shut people off, more accepting but I still don't know who I am. I mean I can't claim to

know who I am. I always have this little thing that I do; you know how they refer to God as Hu [He]? Allah Hu? Hu am I? I am Hu.<sup>389</sup>

For Captain, it is the *kamil shaykh*, the perfected *shaykh*, Bawa Muhaiyaddeen who reached this state of perfection and was able to guide his disciples through the journey of return to their origins. For without a *shaykh*, this realization is not possible. As a result not only is Bawa perceived by his disciples to be the perfected being, the *insan al-kamil* but his state of being, and perhaps his life, according to his followers, then serves as the most primary lesson. For his disciples, it is a teaching that challenges all to return to one's origins and birthright of the *insan al-kamil*.

## Conclusions

The aim of this chapter was not to provide a definitive history of Bawa rather the purpose was to highlight the different approaches to who Bawa was according to his diverse disciples. Much is not known about Bawa prior to his emergence from the jungles of Sri Lanka, leaving the historical personage of Bawa, beyond his public ministries, an indefinable story. What is known of this historical personage is related with his spaces that have been explored in the previous two sections. Due to the little that can be verified of the historical Bawa, I utilized this chapter as a means to approach Bawa not as a historical figure, but rather as a timeless entity that he has become for his disciples. This approach provides a framework to comprehend why and how

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<sup>389</sup> Captain, this is the name given to her by Bawa and the name that she requested that I use in my project. Interview with author, in the kitchen of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. April 8, 2014. *Hu* (He) is one of the names often recited during Sufi *dhikr*. The sound of *Hu*, often made from the back of one's throat, sometimes represents one's breathe and so signifies that with every breathe one recollects God, who is "Just He" (or He/She/It).

Bawa remains the central authority figure at the heart of a contemporary Sufi community. With Bawa's passing and the lack of appointment of a successor, Bawa remains the only spiritual leader for this community. It is this premise that led to the exploration of the timeless Bawa through his many titles given to him by his disciples.

Throughout his ministries he was known as a healer, farmer, cook, painter, singer and a teacher who expounded on the principal relationship between the divine and its creation, humanity. His diverse devotees not only related Bawa as a father figure (reflective of God) but a *guru*, *swami* and *shaykh* who perfected his essence and was able to lead his disciples on the path of return to God. This meant that Bawa was understood as the *Qutb* (the axial pole) but some theological and cosmological narratives by his disciples, based either on personal experiences or surmised from listening to his numerous discourses, suggested that he was the *Awwal Qutb* or the Primal *Qutb* that manifested from the *Nur* Muhammad, the paragon of the *insan al-kamil* (the perfected being) from the first moments of cosmological activity. This particular theological tradition of *insan al-kamil* and the Prophet Muhammad as being an exemplar of this perfected state places Bawa's own ideas in a larger Sufi milieu. Bawa's ministry was both inclusive and expansive as his own perception of himself and his teachings appealed to his Sri Lankan and North American contingencies. I claimed that they were formed specifically in a Tamil Islamic Sufi milieu and further refined in North America. These settings enabled an approach to God and his agents (i.e., Prophets, saints etc) as transcending any religious affiliation.

All the individual titles, along with Bawa's own self-ascribed names, explored in this chapter were an attempt to comprehend the timeless Bawa and to highlight a broader mystical and cosmological reality of Bawa. Whether Bawa was the *Awwal Qutb* or an enlightened human being is a theological discussion that is not up for scholarship to ascertain. However, even

though these titles were given to Bawa, these titles ascribed to him by his disciples in many ways are complementary. These titles capture states of interface, within Islamic, Hindu and Tamil cultural and religious milieus. In this regard, as Bawa himself articulated, when one considers the names of Bawa in unity with each other, as opposed to in contradiction, i.e, a Hindu or a Muslim, then one begins to transcend definitive categories. It is in the transcendent realms that his disciples perceive and relate to Bawa. Yet, this preeminence is dependent on the most fundamental understanding of who Bawa was and is to his followers, the *insan al-kamil*, which is a state of perfected being that is interrelated to his status as *Qutb*, *shaykh* and guru.

In tracing the phenomenon of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship from Pennsylvania to Jaffna I highlighted several moments in which continuity was maintained, such as in the centrality of the authority figure of Bawa. In the process, moments of dissonance from one locality to another were also highlighted and one such example was of female engagement and presence from Pennsylvania to Jaffna. Chapter 8 seeks to explore the role of gender in the Fellowship, by asking the question of how gender norms and roles manifest in rituals and sacred spaces in the communities of Bawa. In exploring this question in the next chapter, I unpack how gender, in practices, leadership roles and rituals, has developed in both locales and what this means for our study of gender specifically in North American and South Asian Sufism.

## Chapter 8

### From the Matron to Maryam: Women in the Communities of Bawa

#### Introduction

This chapter explores the presence of female devotees in the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship and the Serendib Sufi Study Circle. I use the presence and leadership of women as one of the crosscutting themes to explore both the Fellowship and the Circle in their respective contexts and in relation with each other. Female members continue to be active in non-official roles as lay members, translators etc., in varying capacities in the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. They also continue to be official leaders in the Fellowship Executive Committee. Female presence and activity is a concurrent reality in both geographical contexts of Bawa's ministries. Females and males maintain active engagement in Bawa's communities where Bawa instructed them to do so. This may have meant, for instance, that females and males lead weekly discourse meetings and fulfilled administrative roles, such as serving as the Executive Secretary on the Fellowship Executive Committee.<sup>390</sup> These practices of inclusion do not necessarily equate with the addition of the *masjid*. During Islamic rituals, such as *mawlid*s or prayers in the mosque, female roles are not as prominent, and separation of males and females lead to gender separated spaces. Though women are a regular presence in the *masjid* and attend Ramadan and *mawlid* celebrations, they do not lead these events formally in North American spaces of Bawa.

The latter would appear to keep with Marcia Hermansen's (2004) observation in which she writes that "to the degree that *sharia*-based ritual is incorporated, gender distinctions become visibly operative in the functioning of American Sufi movements" (2004, 55). Readily applying the Hermansen's statement to the Fellowship, though, would be a simplistic conclusion to draw

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<sup>390</sup> These official positions and roles are further discussed in Chapter 9's subsection *Defining the Purpose of the Fellowship*.

based only on what is found at the Headquarters of the Fellowship. When shifting attention from Bawa's North American sites to his Sri Lankan spaces, a different spectrum of female presences and authorities are experienced. The Sri Lankan sites of Bawa requires a reassessment of theories that suggest that inclusivity of females in varying capacities in North America is indeed a representative trend in the Fellowship.

In my analysis of gender in the Fellowship in Pennsylvania and the Circle in Jaffna I propose that where spaces in Philadelphia are indeed more gendered in relation to Sri Lanka, such as the mosque or even Bawa's room at the times of *mawlid* recitations, these cases need to be further nuanced. This was specifically with the case with *mawlids* in Philadelphia, a ritual during which genders are separated and women are not involved in the recitations. What may initially be viewed as a limitation in ritual experience due to female gender may be interpreted from a different perspective, especially when one shifts to the female immigrant presence, such as those from regions of South Asia where *mawlids* have been historically affiliated with female and domestic spaces.

Moreover, what remains remarkably distinct amongst all of the spaces established by Bawa is Mankumban on Velanai Island, a shrine dedicated to Maryam. Mankumban presents a unique site of not only female authoritative presence, both as it impacts ritual and devotional practices, but it also embodies the highest teaching of the feminine ideal articulated in some metaphysical Sufi traditions. Hence, Maryam's shrine in Mankumban functions as a distinguished space for understanding the crossroads of feminine devotional and metaphysical pathways of Sufism. A comparable space does not exist within Bawa's North American sites.

Scholars of Sufism in North America have recommended that one of the distinct realities of Sufism in North America is its inclusive propensity toward female Sufi leaders and

practitioners (Hermansen 2004, 2006; Dickson 2012; Hazen 2011). I however suggest that the Fellowship complicates this projected trend of female leadership and egalitarianism. In the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, where the sole spiritual and formal authority of the community remains a male *shaykh* and saint, this transnational movement showcases vibrant and varying intersections of female presences and spaces, one that is only realized when an American movement's natal counterpart is mapped. In doing so, it challenges one to re-think about gender in Sufism in the Fellowship and subsequently in North America and South Asia.

### **In Search of Women in Sufism**

In spaces such as the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Headquarters in Philadelphia during ritual events certain protocols are expected of male and female members, especially in terms of etiquette from the *masjid* to Bawa's room. Women were readily more subjected to these expectations than their male counterparts. In Jaffna, however, a fascinating figure was encountered. This figure was the matron of the *ashram*. Additionally a sacred space, which was a *masjid-mazar* complex dedicated to the figure of Maryam by Bawa was also highlighted. These spaces and positions of authority beg the question has Sufism always contained such figures and fluid spaces for women?

### *Women in the History of Sufism*

One of the challenges of studying gender and Sufism (or any religious tradition) is locating female voices amidst a tradition that has been penned by male teachers, scholars and writers. Within Sufism another tier of paradox is evident in relation to females and femininity. On the one hand, the feminine ideal, both as a creative and theophanic principle, has been central to



many Sufi thinkers' theologies because it has been interpreted as a necessity in cosmological creation (Murata 1992; Shaikh 2012; Schimmel 1997; Elias 1988). The elevation of the ideal femininity in cosmology did not, however, readily translate to women as earthly and biological creatures. These two simultaneous processes of understanding females and femininity resulted in dual methodologies in the study of women and Sufism.

Laury Silvers (2014)<sup>391</sup> writes that the “sheer number of extant reports of men compared to women in the formative literature means that some are read as marginal to the development, transmission, and preservation of Sufi practices, knowledge, and teaching” (25). Silvers suggests that one of the challenges to understanding the role of women in Sufism has been the varying interpretations of the categories of “spirituality” or religiosity as it pertains to women. Gender norms were also implicated by other sociological factors (Silvers 2014, 29). Amila Buturovic (2001)<sup>392</sup> argues these domains defined by sociological factors (i.e., gender norms) influenced female roles as mothers, wives, daughters and it is within these gender norms that Sufi women asserted their identity (148). Sufi women, such as famous Rabi‘a al-‘Adawiya (d. 801),<sup>393</sup> who

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<sup>391</sup> Laury Silvers is currently an Instructor in the Department for the Study of Religion and the Department for Near and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Toronto, in Toronto, Canada. Her areas of study are in Sufism, Sufi metaphysics and theology, Sufi interpretation of the Qur‘an, along with early Islamic intellectual tradition, women and gender in Islam and progressive Islam in North America. Silvers helped found the Islamic Mysticism Group at the AAR and was on its steering committee for six years, while also co-chairing it for three years. Silvers is also an activist within “the female authority movement in Islam.” Not only was she a former board member of the Progressive Muslim Union of North America, but also she has been organizing women-led prayers and co-founded the Unity Mosque of Toronto (gender-equal and LGBTQ-Open) prayer space in Canada. She is also a contributor to the blog *Feminism and Religion* that can be found at <http://feminismandreligion.com/about/> (Accessed December 29, 2014). More about Silvers can be found on her personal website <http://laurysilvers.com> (Accessed December 29, 2014). She has authored, *A Soaring Minaret: Abu Bakr al-Wasiti and the Rise of Baghdadi Sufism* (2010).

<sup>392</sup> Amila Buturovic is an Associate Professor in the Department of Humanities at York University, in Toronto, Canada. Her area of interests are in religion, culture and cultural studies, Ottoman Balkans, Ottoman Bosnia, Islam in the Balkans, Medieval Arabo-Islamic cultures, Islamic mysticism, Sacred space in Islam, Islamic epigraphy, translation and multivocality. Her recent publication is *Carved in Stone, Etched in Memory: Death, Tombstones and Commemoration in Bosnian Islam since c. 1500* (2015).

<sup>393</sup> Rabi‘a al-‘Adawiya, born AD 717 in Basra, is often cited as the “first true saint of Islam” (Buturovic 2001, 144). She was likely around the age of ninety when she died in Basra, approximately AD 801 (Smith 2001, 22). In fact, references to her by Sufis historically and currently by scholars is a testament to her influence on Sufism. Margaret Smith’s *Rabi‘a: The Life and Works of Rabi‘a and Other Women Mystics in Islam* (1994) is one such example. The

were deemed exceptional are accepted as Sufis on the basis that they were “truly men” by transcending their ‘women-ness’ through rigour in mystical devotion (Buturovic 2001, 144). These factors presented limitations to voices of Sufi women when captured in literary traditions, especially from classical and formative periods. Voices of women in the history of Sufism have been noted through male Sufi writers of hagiographies or narratives of holy and exemplary peoples.<sup>394</sup> Others have called attention to particular female Sufi personalities that have stood out in the development of classical Sufism.<sup>395</sup> For instance, one interpretation of Sufi women on the path was through the state of “reverse genderizations” or “being a man” (2013, 81). This approach of “reverse genderizations” is depicted in many other studies of women in Sufism. Jamal Elias (1988)<sup>396</sup> utilizes a similar reading of women in Sufism. He notes that women who reached a state of perfection were often said to have achieved the status of a man, such as the Indian saint Farid al-Din Ganj-i Shakar: “a man sent in the form of a woman” (1988, 211).

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biographer, al-Munawi stated, “She was the most famous among them, of great devotion and conspicuous in worship and of perfect purity asceticism” (Smith 2001, 22). Much of her life though is based on speculation and hagiography rather than historical fact. She is known for her asceticism and love as central to approaching God.

<sup>394</sup> Rkia Cornell’s seminal translation of the eleventh century Persian mystic Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami’s *Dhikr an-niswa al-muta’abbidat as-Sufiyyat* or *Early Sufi Women*, is one such example. It records many instances of Sufi women and their pieties, practices and relationships (both human and divine).

<sup>395</sup> Arezou Azad (2013) discusses one such case, the ninth century mystic Umm Ali. Azad does this as a means to highlight the different approaches achieved by Sufi females, specifically Umm Ali, throughout their lifetime that ranged from studying with famous Sufi masters to marriage and family life (2013, 73-80).

<sup>396</sup> Jamal Elias (1988) also surveys early female mystics who lived ascetic lifestyles based on notions of sexual purity (Hasna al-‘Abida of Basra), fasting (Mu’ada bint ‘Abd Allah al-‘Adawiyya and Fatima bint ‘Abd al-Rahman b ‘Abd al-Ghaffar al Khurrani of Egypt) and devotional prayer (wife of Muhammad b. Shuja or Rabi’bint Isma’il) in an attempt to abandon this world (1988, 209). Jamal J. Elias is the Walter H. Annenberg Professor in the Humanities and Professor of Religious Studies and South Asian Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia. He teaches on Islamic thought, culture and history with focus on Sufism, Islam and modernity and also visual and material culture in the Middle East and South Asia. His recent publications include *On Wings of Diesel: Trucks, Identity and Culture in Pakistan* (2011) and *Aisha’s Cushion: Religious Art, Perception and Practice in Islam* (2012).

Studies of women in classical Sufism also explore the nuances of Sufi practices and language in relation to their male counterparts. Maria M. Dakake (2007)<sup>397</sup> employs hagiographies and literary traditions by male Sufis to map themes in how female Sufis spoke of the love of the “Divine Beloved.” Dakake argues for a particular “feminine interiorisation” that was reliant on “domesticity” out of necessity (i.e., females relegated to the home/private domain) that further result in a particular theme of female “chosenness”<sup>398</sup> or spiritually intimate relationship with the Divine Beloved. Her examples of female Sufis range from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries, such as Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyyah or the female Sufi teacher of Ibn ‘Arabi, Fatimah bt. al-Muthanna (2007).

Silvers (2010) in a response to Dakake (2007) calls for the need to contextualize Sufi women’s experience in relation to one’s own era, theology, geography and other sociological and religious factors that result in unique forms of pieties, instead of speaking to Sufi women’s experience in history in “overarching” frameworks (Silvers 2010, 35).<sup>399</sup> That is the “domesticity” or the private domain spoken of by Dakake may not be the same in eighth century in Baghdad as it was in tenth century in Syria. Notable in these references to the studies of Sufi women in historical contexts is that men’s Sufi identities were not been marked by “maleness” as a biological and social category while “for a woman, however, the story is rarely told without reference to the dynamics of gender” (Flueckiger 2006, 9). Buturovic (2001) adds that “Sufi

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<sup>397</sup> Maria M Dakake is an Associate Professor and Chair in the Religious Studies Department at George Mason University. Her areas of research include Islamic thought, Qur’anic studies, Shi’a and Sufi traditions and women’s issues. She just completed the collaborative project *HarperCollins Study Quran* (forthcoming, Spring 2015) and is working on the Routledge Companion to the Qur’an.

<sup>398</sup> This chosenness develops from Qur’anic verse on “reciprocal love” which continues to warn a “rebellious group of people” that if the words of God are not followed the group of people can be substituted with “a people whom He loves and who love Him” (Qur’an 5:54) (Dakake 2007, 76). According to Dakake, some Sufi women that she studies, such as Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyyah, understood this to be them, pointing to a particular chosenness and subsequent “intimacy” (2007, 77).

<sup>399</sup> Silvers does this by focusing specifically on personalities after the Prophet Muhammad to about the tenth century in Baghdad and the surrounding regions (2010, 35).

women's participation in the mystical path has never been simple: rather, it has been predicated on their ability to navigate through the social constructions- Sufi and non-Sufi alike- of gender and public/private space" (135). Despite these varying social factors that have impeded access to voices of female Sufis in historical contexts, it is recognized that

[...] pious, mystic, and Sufi women were engaged socially with one another. They visited each other at home, met at gatherings, travelled to spend time with each other, passed along accounts of each other's knowledge or practices, worshipped with one another, and caught up with each other's news (Silvers 2014, 48).<sup>400</sup>

These opportunities for female participation, even informally and in private domains, have been a documented tendency of Sufism. So if unearthing the lived reality of Sufi women was one approach to women in classical Sufism, theorizing the feminine principle in cosmological reality was another.

### *The Feminine Ideal on the Path*

The feminine ideal was aptly put forth in writings of the great Sufi theologian Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1240), who having had female teachers himself, developed the principle of the "creative feminine" (Elias 1988, 215). For Ibn al-'Arabi the "spiritual woman" epitomized the ultimate example of union with the Divine (Elias 1988, 216). Ibn al-'Arabi presented the "celestial

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<sup>400</sup> Schimmel writes that "Sufism, more than stern orthodoxy, offered women a certain amount of possibilities to participate actively in the religious and social life," recording examples such as in the Bektashi Order in Ottoman Turkey where female participation was popular in Sufi ritual activities on par with men (1975, 423). Schimmel highlights exemplary women in Sufi history writing that "It seems that in the early years women were not only female disciples of great Sufi masters, but they also participated in community gatherings devoted to recitations from the Quran and to *dhikr*" (2003, 42).

woman as a feature of the divine” who stood above the male (Elias 1988, 217; Corbin 1998). Accordingly, then, to contemplate Eve, “the perfect image of God embodied,” was for the mystic to contemplate the Divine (Elias 1988, 217; Shaikh 2012; Dakake 2006; Hirtenstein 1999). Figures, such as Maryam (Mary) the mother of Isa (Jesus) and Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, became both real and symbolic examples in theological and literary traditions (i.e., the works of Jalaladin Rumi and Ibn al-‘Arabi) of this ideal of a “celestial woman” (Murata 1992). I return to this feature when I discuss Maryam further below.

The veneration of the celestial woman is complicated by the fact that the “perfect woman as Sophia or the creative feminine” was not equal to the female human being (Elias 1988, 218; Shaikh 2012). Woman is a mirror who reflects man’s contemplation of the Divine. In the writings of early Sufis (such as hagiographies and poems), one sees the “role of the physical woman as human being [...] minimized so that she becomes an accessory to the course of events in mystic life” while concurrently encountering the veneration of the “celestial woman as the ideal, the creative feminine” (Elias 1988, 219). It is between these two tiers of femininity, one in the physical biological form, and the other, and the spiritual and metaphysical form that the male Sufi is embedded.<sup>401</sup> Although the male as human being may be hierarchically below the “ideal woman” he is, nevertheless, above the female human being (Elias 1988, 220). It is this complex hierarchical relationship between God, the ideal woman, man as Adam, and woman as Eve as embodied within societal gender norms that is crucial to grasp in the representation of Sufi women. These norms have interspersed with cultural notions of patriarchy and gender

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<sup>401</sup> The study of gender and Sufism has often been synonymous with women in Sufism. The Associate Professor of South Asian and Islamic Studies at Emory University Scott Kugle is one example of a scholar who challenges this limitation with his research. *Sufis and Saints Bodies: Mysticism, Corporeality and Sacred Power in Islamic Culture* (2007) engages both male and female experiences in the path of Sufism, exploring how homosexual sex and love was utilized by some historical Sufi personalities as a means to achieve love of God.

expectations and further married to religious ideals of purity, aspects that influence discussions of women in contemporary Sufism.

*Leaders, Rituals and Shrines: Female Presences in Contemporary Sufism*

Contemporary studies of Sufi women across varying regions have been invested in documenting the complex ways in which Sufi women maintain and participate in leadership roles, most often as they unfold within negotiated spaces and relationships (Kugle 2007; Raudvere 2002; Schielke 2008; Bellamy 2011; Hill 2010). Catharina Raudvere's (2002)<sup>402</sup> study of Sufi women in Turkey is one such example. In it she calls attention to the crossroads of Sufism and Islamism, specifically as they impact the role of female Sufis and the ways in which they participate in rituals in Istanbul (2002, 29). In her article on the same topic, Raudvere (2003) explains that often scholars look to "congregational worship, with the mosque service as the prototype" to determine the extent to which women are involved in Islam (27). However, she explains why this may be a limitation:

Women's collective prayers are to a much lesser extent documented and analysed since they more rarely perform the daily obligatory prayers as joint ceremonies, but rather engage in other forms of prayer. Meeting in private homes have often been considered, by scholars and Muslim theologians alike, as a general social activity rather than a religious one (Raudvere 2003, 27).

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<sup>402</sup> Catharina Raudvere is a Professor for History of Religions in the Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional studies at the Centre for Modern European Studies at the University of Copenhagen. Her areas of interests are in Islam in Europe, the Balkans and Turkey along with Muslim migrants in Europe, Muslim diaspora culture and Muslim rituals in transnationalism. She has several publications relating to Sufism, including the co-edited volume, *Sufism Today: Heritage and Tradition in the Global Community* (2008).

Raudvere calls for the need to shift one's paradigms of sacred and even secular spaces when one seeks example of female Sufis. In her own study, she initially began with "formal Sufi groups," but she found that she needed to move towards "informal group of women with only peripheral connections to the traditional established orders" (Raudvere 2003, 27). As she explained in her monograph "neither identity nor ritual practices are fixed to particular places," rather, "new spaces are carved out [...]" by Sufi women who are dominated by familial, political, economic and social obligations (Raudvere 2002, 47). She further explains that it would be a great mistake to think that "[...] women are always on the galleries of the Sufi lodges at a proper distance from the core events, though the arenas for women's rituals may be less visible from the outside and also less accessible" (Raudvere 2003, 27). This need to shift sites is representative of what took place in the present case study of the Bawa Muhaiydeen Fellowship. It was not in the *masjid* of Bawa in Philadelphia, the center of Islamic prayer for the community, that one found the engagement and presence of women, but rather in Bawa's room and his *ashram* and Mankumban in Sri Lanka, spaces that were pluralistic and fluid in nature.

The latter need to shift spaces is also furthered in Samuli Schielke's study of female participation and leadership in the Egyptian context (2008).<sup>403</sup> In Schielke's study, women's ability to practice Sufi rituals was determined by their social and class identity (2008, 99). Similar to Raudvere's findings, Schielke illustrated that when he shifted his study of women in Sufism in Egypt to "informal groups that are not officially registered, and often have little in the

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<sup>403</sup> Samuli Schielke is a Social and Cultural Anthropologist who works mainly on contemporary Egypt. He held a postdoc at the Department of Anthropology and African Studies in Mainz, Germany and in the University of Eastern Finland. Since 2009, he has worked as a Research Fellow at Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin, Germany. From 2010 to 2014, he directed the research and exhibition project *In Science of Europe: Considering the Possible in Africa and the Middle East*. He has published extensively; *The Perils of Joy* (2012) and *Egypt in the Future Tense* (2011). He is an External Lecturer in Visual and Media Anthropology at the Free University in Berlin. He teaches photography and anthropology. He also makes films and documentaries. Please see his personal website for more details <http://www.samuli-schielke.de/research.htm> (Accessed May 10, 2015).

way of organization beyond the commitment of a group of followers to a spiritual leader” and in which case followers were not “exclusive” to one movement or Sufi *shaykh* but rather “fluid” he found presences of women more readily (Schielke 2008, 96-97). It was in these dynamic spheres that “women have the strongest presence and the greatest opportunities for participation and leadership” (Schielke 2008, 97). These studies thus far have been highlighting the dynamic and fluid approaches to examining Sufi women in contemporary context and this is supported in explorations of women in the South Asian contexts.

In South Asia the role of female Sufi leaders has been an area of study which has gained much momentum in recent decades, be it in the representations of female presence in ritual spaces (Bellamy 2011; Pemberton 2000, 2004) and activities or as leaders in their own right, often due to familial ties to a male Sufi leader (Flueckiger 2006). These studies have also been oriented thematically towards sacred spaces, especially Sufi shrines. In Carla Bellamy’s<sup>404</sup> (2011) study, it is the fluid structure of the *dargah* that presents a platform for female activity that is beyond only Islamic or Sufi identity markers. She posits that “Muslim saint shrine culture encompasses forms of religiosity, economy, legitimacy and authority that are particular to South Asian culture as it exists in a subcontinental context rather than particular to exclusively Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Christian institutions” (2011, 6). Due to these specific cultural-religious contexts of pluralistic shrine cultures in South Asia she understands *dargahs* as “microcosmic public spaces” in which new identities and communities are created amongst pilgrims who often go against the norms of socially constructed ideals (2011, 21). Shrine culture is a critical space in

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<sup>404</sup> Her study is a rich ethnography that explores the *dargah* of Husain Tekri or “Husain Hill.” She depicts the rituals of healing and possessions that take place in this particular shrine amongst the diverse devotees: Muslim, Hindu and varying religious traditions in South Asia. Carla Bellamy is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College in New York. Her area of study is on the crossroads of religious identity, religious conflict, and ideas of selfhood, healing practices in contemporary India.



the present study, as seen from Coatesville with Bawa's *mazar* to Jaffna's Mankumban. Shrines have been a space in which many scholars interested in Sufi female presence in South Asia have sought such voices. In the networks of Bawa's transnational communities, it is in shrine space that one finds female presence and engagement in Jaffna, both as it is dedicated to Maryam and led by one form of female leader, the matron.

Kelly Pemberton (2000, 2004) calls attention to the role of women as "ritual specialists" in South Asian context, especially as they take place in Sufi shrines, one that has not been without its criticisms of legitimacy:

Although centuries-old debates over the nature of these ritual activities have never been settled among Sufis, or between Sufis and their critics, Sufism itself has really been condemned wholesale by those who decry its contemporary manifestations. Within the framework of devotion to Sufi saints, however, women's ritual activities have, more often than not, been regarded as problematic (Pemberton 2004, 4).

Pemberton recognizes that historically there have been female disciples who have studied under the guidance of Sufi teachers. Women particularly in Sufi families, such as mothers, wives, daughters or sisters of *pirs* (teachers)<sup>405</sup> have also been able to perform activities similar to those

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<sup>405</sup> Pemberton discusses such authoritative female roles as "de facto *pirs*" in more detail in her article "Women *Pirs*, Sainthood Succession, and Spiritual Guidance in South Asian Sufism" (2006). In it she examines the relationship of a *pir* (master) and *murid* (disciple) by observing cases where females act as "de facto *pirs*" (Pemberton 2006, 68). There are three key types of *piri-muridi* relationships; one of offering a *bai'at* or allegiance to a spiritual guide (Pemberton 2006, 62), a formal recognition of a spiritual guide (*khalifa*) who is a lesser version of a *pir* or *shaykh* (Pemberton 2006, 62). The last one is described as an "associational" model, one in which the *pir* is not technically a part of a Sufi *tariqa*, but is someone who has "acquired forms of 'secret' knowledge" (Pemberton 2006, 62). For instance, he or she may know how to interpret dreams, is a scholar of the Islamic sciences, or practices forms of spiritual healing (Pemberton 2006, 62). It is this latter model of interpreting dreams and practicing 'magic,' or

of a male *pir*, such as by providing healing services or distributing “amulets” (Pemberton 2004, 5).<sup>406</sup> Pemberton approaches Sufi shrines as informal institutions and also as “[...] the only ‘public’ gathering places that are socially acceptable for [women] to visit” due to lenient restrictions (Pemberton 2004, 2). For Pemberton, like for Bellamy, it is the shrine, and its various sub-spaces that provide accessibility to women.<sup>407</sup> She writes that the “key to understanding that women can and do play very significant roles in Sufism today, not only as pilgrims and disciples,” but in various authoritative capacities, rests in recognizing “the smaller spaces that are less well-known” (Pemberton 2004, 3). It is in the smaller “ancillary spaces” wherein women are part of a larger “network” of shrine space surrounding a dead and a living *pir* (Pemberton 2004, 3). They are either part of a *dargah* complex or are located at a distance from one.<sup>408</sup> Less popular Sufi *dargahs*, or auxiliary shrines, are part of the larger *dargahs* that are used by women, mainly for those who operate as de facto *pirs* (Pemberton 2004, 3).<sup>409</sup> In the present case study

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performing healing rituals which has acquired the term *bazaari* Sufism or a form of “popular Sufism” in which females are actively noted (Pemberton 2004, 11).

<sup>406</sup> Another dynamic highlighted has been the importance of familial ties, which is captured in Joseph Hill’s studies (2010; 2014). Hill explores the role of *muqaddama* (feminine of *muqaddam* which means spiritual guide of the Tijani Sufi order) (2010). These female Sufi leaders are able to maintain authority due to their relationships with a male family member (i.e., husband or father) who is a *muqaddam*. Females develop leadership roles in which they may have disciples or even lead rituals, such as *dhikr*, roles that have been often limited to males in this cultural context. But by oscillating between “domesticity” and “publicity” Hill highlights how female Sufis act as leaders in contemporary Senegal, based on the discretion or approval by a male Sufi *shaykh* in the order (2010, 383). He concludes on these crossroads of negotiations: “These women refract both liberal and Islamic traditions through their hybridized conceptions of equality and piety, experimenting with new ways of thinking about and modeling liberation in Islamic and Sufi terms” (Hill 2010, 403).

<sup>407</sup> This is not to suggest that all Sufi shrines are all inclusive to women. Some shrines in South Asia do not allow women to enter the main sanctuary where the tomb is or have separate rooms for women altogether.

<sup>408</sup> The *dargah* or *khanaqah* (Sufi lodge) plays a key role for pilgrims who visit a shrine for ritual prayers or for pilgrimages, but “auxiliary shrines” tend to be more central for local pilgrims and especially women (Pemberton 2004, 3). These local practitioners use its sacred site on a daily basis. Pilgrims do not frequent the smaller spaces, though they are managed by caretakers (*khadim*) or *sajjada-nisin*, the wives of *dargah* caretakers, thus, it “[...] is unlikely to be rigidly controlled, thereby affording women scope to act with relative autonomy” (Pemberton 2004, 4).

<sup>409</sup> An excellent study of such female authority, or “de facto *pir*”, as noted in Pemberton (2004) is found in Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger *In Amma’s Healing Room* (2006), which documents the activities of Amma (mother), a female spiritual healer from Hyderabad, who is married to a *pir* associated with the Qadiri lineage and is a popular spiritual (Sufi) healer.

the *ashram*, along with the rooms dedicated to Bawa from Pennsylvania to Jaffna are examples of these smaller ancillary rooms.

The above studies of women in contemporary Sufism, similar to the study of the classical and historical contexts, highlight the varying “crossroads” and intersections within which women’s identities oscillate (Flueckiger 2006). Sufi women’s presence and engagement is dependent on negotiations between religious, social, economic and familial realms and they are most affected by cultural norms, which for instance in the South Asian sphere dominates spaces and accessibility. It is upon the convergence of various identities that Sufi women forge a unique path in personal expressions of piety and religiosity, which must be navigated both in public and private domains. As Schielke writes, “While women do have a range of possible ways to participate in Sufi gatherings, their involvement requires justification more often than that of men. Their position remains precarious, the more so the further they step out of typically female roles” (2008, 104). This trend of finding female presence and authority in “ancillary spaces” within Sufi communities or networks of spaces proves to be true in our study of Bawa’s communities in Sri Lanka, wherein female activity and leadership is depicted in the presence of a matron at Bawa’s *ashram* and the ancillary space she occupies. However, these negotiations unfold uniquely in a North American context.

### **Gender and Sufism in North America**

Rkia Elaroui Cornell writes, “outside of the United States or Western Europe, it is hard to find a Sufi order that accepts women as a matter of policy” (1999, 18-19). Pemberton (2004) found in her study of the Gudri Shah Order in South Asia that the last three *pirs* initiated *murids* (disciples) from the western nations. This decision impacted the direction of the order’s *silsila*

(lineage), resulting in changes to the order. These changes were implemented (1) to suit the interest in Sufism from individuals from Europe, Canada and the United States and (2) because the initiation of disciples from different countries also meant that female followers from these western nations were “[...] less bound by social rules of comportment and gender segregation” (Pemberton 2004, 9). As a result of these early observations, it has been proposed that women in Sufism in regions such as Europe, Canada and America have experienced far more egalitarianism than their counterparts in lands where Islam developed historically. Studies thus far have highlighted that western female presences in Muslim cultures are altering gender norms in institutional Sufi practices. But is this an accurate representation of what is taking place in lived Sufism in North America? How these experiences have played out in North America have differed from one Sufi community to the next, but the suggestion thus far has been that Sufi communities that develop in North America have adapted more inclusively to female discipleship and leadership positions (Hermansen 2004; Dickson 2012; Bakhtiar 1996).

One study to document such trends in a particular Sufi community is Juliet Gentile-Koren in her masters’ thesis on the development of female authority in the Halveti-Jerrahi community. The grand *shaykh* of the Halveti-Jerrahis, Muzaffer Ozak, initiated two American disciples in the Masjid al-Farah in New York City, Lex Hixon and *shaykha* Fariha al Jerrahi (2007, 6).<sup>410</sup> Gentile-Koren writes that “[...] it appears that Ozak’s role as a break of convention did not originate in America but in Turkey” one that emerged as one of the several responses by *shaykh* Muzaffer Ozak to the decades of secularization enforced within Turkey (2007, 26). Ozak

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<sup>410</sup> *Shaykha* Fariha al Jerrahi, formerly known as Phillipa Friedrich, currently leads the New York City center of this community. Amina Ortiz, or *shaykha* Amina Teslima, was appointed by Lex Hixon (*shaykh* Nur), and is the leader of the center in Mexico City (Gentile-Koren 2007, 6). These two female leaders of this community are understood as “transmitters of *baraka*” for the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Sufi Community (NAJSC) (2007, 39).

appointed female *khalifas* (successor) in Turkey, but they were not *shaykhas* (female teachers) as they were in North America (2007, 42).

Julianne Hazen (2011) found in her research of the Alami Tariqa that “Shaykhas provide spiritual guidance to others, but it is not traditionally done in the same fashion as the male shaykhs” according to the teachings of *shaykh* Asaf (2011, 146). When speaking of gender norms particular to this community she writes:

The Alami Tariqa may be one of the few *sharī‘a*-oriented *tarīqas* in the West in which women participate in a majority of the rituals. Shaykh Asaf maintains moderate gender segregation and models and teaches what he considers appropriate behaviour while helping them to spiritually mature on the Sufi path. For example, in adherence to the strict interpretation of *sharī‘a*, Shaykh Asaf does not make physical contact with women during the *intisab* ceremony initiating a *murīd* into the *tarīqa*. Gender, though, is not considered to hinder spiritual progress (2011, 140).<sup>411</sup>

In the Alami Tariqa men and women participate equally in ritual activity, especially since *shaykh* Asaf encourages it. Still presence within ritual activities does not necessarily translate into positions of authority for female members of the Alami Tariqa, but at times *shaykh* Assaf “[...] chooses the most qualified available individual for leadership positions, and gender is one aspect of many that is taken into consideration” (Hazen 2011, 145). Not only is gender a determinant for the appointment of positions within the community, but it is also based on spiritual

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<sup>411</sup> Hazen goes on also to address particular details such as clothing (148-151) and relationships (151- 153) as they impact women within the community.

qualifications and stations. Hazen captures how gender practices unfolded for *shaykh* Asaf, the leader of the community, who ultimately sets the gender norms.

[...] the Alami Tariqa has acculturated to the American setting regarding both ethnic and gender issues and is undergoing a process of Islamisation. Shaykh Asaf instigated Sufism in Waterport by introducing time-honoured Balkan *tariqa* traditions, but allowed it to assume a local identity based on the new culture and participants. As an Islamic scholar and *sharī'a* jurist, Shaykh Asaf has interpreted and applied *sharī'a* to the American setting based on his interpretation of the needs of this culture. This process of Islamisation has been implemented somewhat gradually, allowing the American participants to adjust to Islam and mature as Muslims over time. In his interpretation, Shaykh Asaf has attempted to reduce the influence of foreign and non-Islamic customs and cultivate a Western Islamic *tariqa* that provides a meaningful spiritual path for both men and women regardless of their ethnic backgrounds (Hazen 2011, 154).

Similar to Gentile-Koren's (2007) remarks on Ozak's communities, Hazen found that gender norms were negotiated between natal cultures of the *shaykh* and American culture they transplanted to. These compromises intersected with traditions, as kept in the Sufi tradition's land of origins (i.e., Balkans) and with the norms of the new host country, especially its locality (i.e., Waterport, New York in the United States). This was in addition to the dynamics of the "ethnic backgrounds" of the students who belong to the American Sufi community. It was a "process of Islamisation" that unfolded over time, especially as more and more Americans joined the Alami tariqa.

For *shaykh* Asaf the path of Sufism was not limited to one gender (or ethnicity), though particular roles within the institution were gendered in keeping with *shari'a* and Islamic *adab* (conduct). According to Hazen, these were the critical factors that impacted the roles of gender, both in the spiritual development of *murids*, but also in the everyday activities (i.e., rituals, dress, etc.) of the *murids*. Within the Alami Tariqa, conversion to Islam is necessary to participate fully in the community and as such, this creates distinctive gender norms, likely not evident in communities that do not require conversion to Islam. Hermansen (2006) suggests, “ [...] female participants in Western Sufi movements may feel the need to negotiate their understandings of gender roles so as to reflect both traditional authenticity and a contemporary sense of gender justice” (no pagination, para. 13). If “traditional authenticity” requires particular religious clothing and gender separation, then this may mean that for women who convert to American Sufi communities, such as the Alami Tariqa, gender norms are followed as a means to affirm their newly accepted Islamic identity. Still in American Sufi communities it is the leaders of each community that set the trajectory of gender practices.

Dickson (2012, 2015) in his research of American Sufi leaders interviewed Sufi leaders across America, asking how they responded to gender in their respective communities. Dickson writes that “indeed, contemporary gender norms in North America have allowed for women to, in many cases, play more prominent roles in Sufi orders than would be possible in other contexts, representing a significant adaptation of Sufi practice” (2015, 153). In Dickson’s study, examples are seen with the Halveti-Jerrahi order of Muzzafer Ozak and its inclusion of women that was made “feasible in North America” (2015, 153-154). Both Gentile-Koren (2007) and Dickson (2015) suggest that these processes began in Turkey for Ozak.

When speaking of Zia Inayat Khan's Sufi Order International and Hazrat Inayat Khan, the originator of the movement, Dickson explains that Hazrat Inayat Khan "was an innovator in this respect, as he consciously initiated women into some of the highest positions in his Sufi Order of the West, and even convinced Sufi teachers in India that this was the best course of action, despite their initial opposition" (Dickson 2015, 155). The first disciples of Hazrat Inayat Khan were both women, Rabia Martin in the United States and Zohra Mary Williams in England. Khan initiated only four disciples to the level of guides and they were all women (Dickson 2015).<sup>412</sup> Khan's movement has been represented as a "more universal movement," and so scholars have suggested that such Sufi groups have allowed "more visible female leadership than those adhering to Islamic norms" (Hazen 2011, 139).

Dickson makes several conclusions with regards to the Sufi leaders he interviewed and their comments on gender.

In terms of gender, most teachers described lessening the separation of genders in mosques and Sufi centers, whether by having men and women practice *dhikr* on the same floor, having men and women pray side by side, or by having women lead the *salat*, something that when done in non-Sufi contexts has been quite controversial (2015, 167).

In discussions of the presence of women, spaces are one critical way in which to understand how women negotiate their identity in the North American milieu. This trend was found in studies

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<sup>412</sup> Please see Dickson pp. 188-189 for this. Hazrat Inayat Khan also appointed his daughter, Noor un Nissa Inayat Khan to lead the Sufi Order in America, but she would go on become a British Special Operatives Agent, heroically finding Intel against the Nazis during World War II. For this please see the recent documentary *Enemy of the Reich: the Noor Inayat Khan Story* by Rob Gardner. More on the film can be found on <http://www.enemyofthereich.com> (accessed January 8, 2015). Also see her books *King Akbar's Daughter: Stories for Everyone* (2013) and *Twenty Jataka Tales* (1985).



mentioned above of Sufism and gender in Turkey, North Africa and South Asia. Sacred spaces and women's places within them were fluid, especially ancillary or shrine spaces more so than the *masjid*. But within the Nur Ashki Jerrahi and the Threshold Society, women are leading *salat*, which though having been done before is often not the norm.

Not all the leaders that Dickson interviewed promoted openness to female involvement in ritual activity. For instance, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the Islamic Studies Professor and Philosopher at George Washington University, differed amongst the leaders interviewed by Dickson. Though acknowledging historical examples of female Sufi teachers, Nasr still “[...] distinguishes between women's function as teachers within Sufism and administrative roles within Sufi orders” (Dickson 2012, 195). Inclusion of women in ritual activities was observed by most of the leaders reflected an interpretation that “wisdom knows no gender” ultimately suggesting that gender should not be a limitation on the path of Sufism (2012, 202).

Dickson found, however, that amongst the leaders he engaged with, many understood the growing presence of female leaders in far more metaphysical terms. It “[...] was the shared sense amongst many of the teachers interviewed that there was a deeper significance to the prominence of women in Sufism beyond the merely sociological shifts that have occurred in the past century in the West regarding gender norms” (Dickson 2015, 167). The involvement of women in ritual activities and sacred spaces within Sufi communities was not only because of the gender norms found within the North American milieu. Male Sufi *shaykhs* remarked that the presence of Sufi women in the North American context was itself a result of the “spiritual failure of men” that necessitated the balancing by female presence (Dickson 2015, 167). For others it was precisely the feminine nature of women that privileged their ability to tread on the path of love, more than

men's nature, evoking the feminine ideal found in classical Sufism. Here one sees the appeal of tendencies towards the spiritual feminine as the ideal state.<sup>413</sup>

Dickson's interviews with Sufi teachers of America is of course limited to particular *shaykhs* and one *shaykha*, and he in no way intended his study to be a comprehensive analysis of all Sufi teachers. His discussion of the Fellowship does not include a discussion of gender. Nor was gender his primary interest of analysis. His study, however, does begin to point to particular trends in how gender is negotiated within American Sufi communities. He is correct in stating that gender is an example in which Sufism's "tradition" and "transformation" in North America is negotiated. Yet women are not often represented in the official canons of Sufism, though they most certainly are implicated by the views of how particular *shaykhs* and *shaykhas* choose to view their presence in their communities. This is where Dickson's research serves as an important starting point, from which one must move beyond institutional history and official leaders to ancillary roles and spaces. It is in these non-official capacities that one finds a plethora of female presence that challenges the official history of Sufism. This paradigm shift, as I showcase in the example of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship below, does not necessarily speak to gender roles as fully egalitarian or oppressive. Rather it speaks to the reality of how women have been viewed in most religious traditions, especially in Sufism, in liminal states of either/or. This complexity of the positionality of women both metaphysically and biologically, in private and public domains, by male and female Sufi teachers and in official and unofficial spaces is the experience of Sufism for women. If one does not begin with this liminality and

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<sup>413</sup> The feminine was discussed in the introduction to *Women in Sufism* in this chapter, and is further discussed in the subsection of *Maryam in Sufism* in this chapter.

negotiated states of being as the foundation to engaging with gender in Sufism in North America, then one has negated a very fundamental reality of being a Sufi woman.<sup>414</sup>

### **From Philadelphia to Jaffna**

In this study of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship I found that it contained more gendered spaces (i.e., the *masjid*). This was noticed especially during *mawlid*s when spaces, such as Bawa's room, became gender-separated and requirements of modesty (how to dress and veil) were normative, resulting in more limitations for female participation and leadership. Though this may cause one to conclude that the Fellowship is *shari'a* oriented and so implements more gender separation, this does not capture the presence of female activity within the Fellowship as a whole.

#### *"Where will the Women Stand for Prayers?" Gender and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Masjid*

One of the important spaces for ritual activity at the Fellowship Headquarters in Philadelphia is the *masjid*. As established in this study, this space is only one sub-space within the larger community center that forms the Fellowship in Philadelphia.<sup>415</sup> In the initial construction phase of the *masjid*, many disciples of Bawa were apprehensive about the religious (Islamic) association of the community. One of the foremost concerns with the construction of the *masjid*

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<sup>414</sup> There are many Sufi women who are active beyond formal Sufi communities and spaces in North America. For instance, those in the academy and translators of Sufi and Islamic texts, which include Laleh Bakhtiar, Gray (Aisha) Henry (Fons Vitae), Camille Helminski of the Threshold Society (Hazen 2011, 147) and Daisy Khan, the Executive Director of the American Society for Muslim Advancement (ASMA). The activist Dr. Nahid Angha, who succeeded her father, the Shi'a Sufi Shah Maghsoud, currently leads the International Association of Sufism (Hazen 2011, 147). The roles of these women beyond sacred space are often neglected in the study of women and Sufism in North America. Exploring these voices and their contribution to North America would be an excellent contribution to the study of Sufism and women in North America.

<sup>415</sup> For a discussion of the *masjid* please see Chapter 2's subsection *Negotiating Sacred Spaces and Practices*.

was the particular association of Islam and perceptions of Islam's treatment of women by many of the American disciples of Bawa. Zoharah Simmons pointed out this concern to me:<sup>416</sup>

Simmons: And I consider myself a feminist. I had become a feminist during the Civil Rights movement, and you may know that what's called second wave feminism, grew out of the Civil Rights movement. And many of the women, who became the leaders of [...] these were primarily white women, of the feminist movement, had been in the Civil Rights movement and I had gone to one of the early meetings of that group that said we need to work on you know getting rights for women.

[... continues]

So I certainly identified as a feminist, and any religion that you know said women were not equal to men was a no-no for me you know.

[... continues]

[laughter] it was like I was, I was concerned but I, I was not going to go against something. Once I thought this is what Bawa wants us to do, even though I had questions as to why would we, if we're going beyond religion, why do I need to leave Christianity which I had already done, since that's what I had been brought up in.

[... continues]

And go into another religion.

[... continues]

But nonetheless, I certainly helped with the building of the mosque. You know it was a giant project and, while there were professionals brought in to do a lot of the work, we did a lot of

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<sup>416</sup> For more biographical details on Simmons please see Chapter 2 where she is introduced in the early years of the Fellowship's development.

it you know, and we're happy to do it because this was Bawa's project, this was what he wanted us to do.<sup>417</sup>

Simmons, who explains her own involvement in the Civil Rights movements and second wave feminism, was apprehensive about the construction of the mosque because it was associated with a tradition that in her understanding did not maintain egalitarian gender practices. She went on to explain how the degree to which women were involved overall in the Fellowship (and not only the *masjid* per se) became a site of critique from those in Muslim communities outside the Fellowship:

Simmons: But at one point you know, we were seen, as one of the criticisms was that you know the women are up speaking, and this of course was not in the mosque.

[... continues]

But in the Fellowship itself you know, women lead the meetings and stuff like that. So for some Muslim men, and maybe women too, this was totally inappropriate. "Anti-Muslim," [...] and I do know that some of us when Bawa was with us, and when the mosque was built the whole issue of where would the women stand for prayer, and questions about whether there was going [to] be a wall built, and a number of us women were very upset about you know the fact that women had to stand behind men.<sup>418</sup>

Simmons emphasizes the contradictory concerns that began to emerge in relation to the role of women within the Fellowship and one of its sub-spaces, the *masjid*, both for those within the

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<sup>417</sup> Interview with author, via Skype May 16, 2014.

<sup>418</sup> Interview with author, via Skype May 16, 2014.

Fellowship and those who were outsiders ascertaining whether the Fellowship was an authentic Islamic community. Simmons' comments highlight two trends. Females were active in the Fellowship, even in the construction of the *masjid*, but the leadership of women, especially as they led meetings in the Fellowship (and not the *masjid*), created further criticism for the community from other Muslims as to whether the Fellowship was an authentic Muslim community. Women in religions generally, but in Islam and Sufism specifically, become sites and bodies of contestations, precisely as a means to legitimate a community as "authentic."<sup>419</sup>

During Bawa's life in Philadelphia, females were the only disciples who maintained proximity to Bawa regularly. His closest disciples were females, who served as translators, took care of his food. Female disciples were involved in the publication of books and appointed by Bawa to be members of the Executive Committees and sub-committees (i.e., Executive Secretary). They translated and edited Bawa's discourses, and even led discourse meetings and still lead these meetings today. The first disciple to connect with Bawa through letters, assisted by Mauroof, was Carolyn Andrews and she is a seminal member in the Executive Committee (known as Secretary) and in the institutional history of the Fellowship in North America. Females were regularly involved in many facets of the Fellowship prior to the construction of the *masjid*, and they remained active after its construction. However, the *masjid* created anxiety for the Fellowship disciples not only because of its promotion of a particular religious identity (i.e., Islam) but also because it introduced new gender boundaries and practices, as indicated by Simmons in her comments above. The new gender practices (i.e., separate male and female sections for praying or entrances) introduced with the construction of the *masjid* did not reflect the relaxed relationships American disciples had with Bawa.

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<sup>419</sup> Please see this chapter's subsection on *Women in Sufism* more discussion on this.

Simmons also states that Bawa made sure that every detail in the construction of the *masjid* and subsequent rituals that took place in the *masjid* were in complete accordance with accepted Islamic law (i.e., Sunni). This was in order that Muslims beyond the Fellowship legitimately accepted it the mosque. How this impacted women and their space in the *masjid* proved challenging for some of the American female disciples of Bawa:

Simmons: And once you know Bawa said well let's have a curtain you know, a sheer curtain, so that's how the curtain, the sheer curtain came as a result of some women saying you know, this is not fair, this is not the way we've been with you. You know we had total access, no separation of men and women and all of that, and then of course Bawa said we will never be accepted, in the Muslim community as a real mosque, if we don't have a separation between men and women, and if the women are not in the back. 'Cause the whole issue was raised, well what about on the side?

[...continues]

But the way the structure with the women's entrance and the stairs, you know that go up in the mosque feeds into one side or the other. And I know that when there's like the *Eids* and stuff like that, sometimes [...] the men take up much more of the floor space.

[...continues]

And some of us women grumble about that you know.

[...continues]

'Cause they keep moving the curtain back and making our space smaller saying "well the women can go downstairs."

[...continues]

[...] and pray down there. And we're saying "well the men can go downstairs" and then men can go outside if the weather permits you know. So there is sometimes that little you know animosity about us women feeling that you know you're trying to push us back, or out if there's so many men and you need the space.<sup>420</sup>

From Simmons one hears the challenges of female space and presence in the *masjid* at the Fellowship, it is important to remember that she and Jeanne Hockenberry explained that it was the females who first started performing *salat* in Sri Lanka.<sup>421</sup> It was the females who acted as imams, or prayer leaders to each other, before males became involved and assumed this leadership position as prayer leaders, particularly Maryam Kabeer.

Maryam Kabeer, a disciple of Bawa, during the development of the *masjid* in Philadelphia may be considered the first "imam" who led some of the Fellowship members in *salat* in Colombo.<sup>422</sup> She explained to me how this process started:

Maryam Kabeer: [...] so I arrived in Sri Lanka and [...] I heard the call to prayer and, and I was sitting in Bawa's presence and I didn't say anything and then he said and I'm asking him internally should I not pray? And he said "yes, of course you should pray" and he said you just go and do your prayers and the people will follow you. And that's what happened, that's how it manifested. I don't know if you heard that?

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<sup>420</sup> Interview with author, via Skype May 16, 2014.

<sup>421</sup> For the history of the Fellowship *masjid*, please see Chapter 2's subsection on *The Beginning of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship* and *Negotiating Sacred Spaces and Practices*.

<sup>422</sup> For more on Maryam Kabeer please see Chapter 2's subsection on *The Beginning of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship* and *Negotiating Sacred Spaces and Practices*.



S: [...] someone did tell me that they prayed with you from the first time when they were in Colombo and in the house there and then you taught everybody how to pray.

Maryam Kabeer: It's just cause he [Bawa] said so, he said that to do it and so I was standing and leading [...], just doing the prayers and the people were there, Kabeer<sup>423</sup> was somewhere doing the prayers and I noticed that. So eventually I got my period, I went to Bawa's room; I said "can Kabeer lead the prayers now" [...]. And so I had my period and he started leading the prayers. And then we both did and then Bawa told me to teach and I did, you know, how to do the prayers [...]. And then the men started leading the prayers, so then at that point I had no reason to lead the prayers but I still continued to teach.<sup>424</sup>

In the early days, it was the female disciples of Bawa who started praying with Maryam Kabeer, and they took turns leading the prayers and slowly men also joined them. Jeanne Hockenberry, an American disciple of Bawa from Philadelphia who was also present in Colombo, even led the prayers herself.

It was the women, not the men, there were four or five women who really wanted to do these prayers. So we had no imam, we had nobody to give the call to prayer; we had nobody to lead the prayers so I said to Bawa who shall do this? It's just these women who are interested in doing this. He said "You be imam, you give the call to prayer." These are all

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<sup>423</sup> Ahamed Kabeer was appointed as the Tamil imam for the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. For more on Kabeer please see Chapter 2's subsection *The Beginning of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship* and also Chapter 5's early history of *ashram* and Chapter 6's early history of Mankumban. Ahamed Kabeer and Maryam Kabeer were married by Bawa Muhaiyaddeen but they are now divorced.

<sup>424</sup> Interview with author, home of interviewee, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 9, 2014.

women. “But Bawa” I said, “someone might hear us from outside, this is a Muslim area.” Bawa said “don’t worry God will protect you, you just go do it.” So the women are doing the call to prayer, the women are the imams, I think I did it, Maryam [Kabeer] did it, was imam for some of the *waqts* [times] [...]. and so some of us would do the call, some of us would do that and before I left the men got interested and then once the men got interested you know it’s embarrassing you do the *rakats* [cycles of prayer] and the men are behind you, I mean like this is getting like crazy so he [Bawa] finally said now it’s time they know, enough of them know it they can take over doing that and you must step aside. And that was fine with me; it was a big relief to step aside. But that’s how it started. It started in Sri Lanka. Then when we came back we had no mosque, we had to clear, I think they cleared out some rows of chairs in the front of the Fellowship so there would be a little space there for people to do it there. Then when he came back is when we built the mosque.<sup>425</sup>

In narratives of the *masjid* this seminal moment, along with the role of women who first started to pray, as instructed by Bawa, is often absent. Women, who began the prayers in Sri Lanka, would be the builders of the *masjid*. However, the actual construction of the *masjid* led only to disagreements and tensions of where the women would pray in the *masjid*. This contention as to where the women will stand during prayers is highlighted by Simmons in her comments above.

Maryam Kabeer in relaying her experience of this critical time in the Fellowship had a far more metaphysical understanding of the *masjid* and its accessibility to women that differs from Simmons’ experiences:

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<sup>425</sup> Interview with author, home of interviewee, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania April 10, 2014.

And that's a particularly clean and clear *masjid*. One reason is women have the beautiful place, we're not closed off, you know, we're not like removed, we have like almost the best place in the sense of like the dome and everything and, and it's a very clean and clear place for me, you know, it's just like it's nothing but a place of prayer, you know, so literally that's what it is. It's a place of light, a place of prayer, purification, and you know, like even Bawa says that this whole block of blessed and you know, by what? You know? Light of God.<sup>426</sup>

Where Simmons in her comments relates to the uneasiness she felt because she, along with other female companions of the Fellowship, had to pray behind the males of the congregation, Maryam Kabeer relays a rather different perspective. Maryam Kabeer, in her comments above, views the section that women pray in at the *masjid* as far more sacred. As it is right below the hallmark feature of the *masjid*, a stained glass dome with the *Asma ul-Husna* or the Ninety-nine Names of Allah. Maryam Kabeer's explanations are also intriguing because of her role beyond the Fellowship. She is a female *shaykha* in the Tariqa Mustafawiyya, which she was initiated into after Bawa's death. Her own personal history serves a fascinating example of the role of Sufi woman. She had a formative role in the beginning of *salat* in the Fellowship's institutional history as she acted as the prayer leader. Maryam Kabeer articulates that even though Bawa's intentions could have been partly to challenge gender norms, in the boarder context she did not see it as a defiance of gender roles in Islam herself.

Maryam Kabeer: But that's how Bawa did it and I'm sure he did it to blow, to blow this, this status quo.

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<sup>426</sup> Interview with author, home of interviewee, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 9, 2014.

[... continues]

But in the mean time, but we didn't keep doing that, you know, like what happened with I mean the Amina Wadud,<sup>427</sup> is not something that I would do. And I have spoken at countless Muslim conferences and, you know, especially Sufi conferences and we never had any tension with anybody. I mean it's, if you go to the right organization [...] if you're guided to the right group [...] the fact that I'm a woman doesn't limit me at all as a person who can share knowledge and wisdom and light.

[... continues]

And the love of Allah, but I would not be an imam in front of men anymore, I'm just saying that, nor have, nor have. I think in the old days when I was in Jerusalem, a young guy came and I was just doing my prayers and he prayed behind me. This is kind of very informal.

[... continues]

Only in the context of Bawa did this even happen formally but who knows for what reason that that [*sic*] happend.

[... continues]

But furthermore, none of the men were standing up and doing it. And I don't even think many of them knew it and we don't know why Bawa waited until this point for that to introduce it.

[... continues]

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<sup>427</sup> Amina Wadud is a Visiting Professor at the Center for Religious and Cross Cultural Studies at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, where she retired from her previous post as Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University. Her most seminal scholarship has been on the progressive application of Qur'anic exegesis in *Quran and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (1999). Though she gave a *khutbah* (sermon) at Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town, South Africa, she is famously remembered for leading *salat* prayers with male and female congregants at the Episcopal Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in Manhattan in 2005, which resulted in death threats and gained her fame (both negative and positive) across Muslim communities.

Nor is it our problem or our question.

[... continues]

He knows best, we don't know. So I only did, I did what God told me and I did what he [Bawa] told me and then I knew that I didn't have to do that.<sup>428</sup>

Maryam Kabeer did not see her leading prayers for Bawa in Colombo, which included males and females following behind her, as revolutionary. She asserts that it is in no way comparable to the actions of Amina Wadud, who acted as a prayer leader to mix-congregation and continues to do so. For her the purpose of that moment is beyond her understanding and only known to Allah and Bawa, stating that she would not lead in that capacity again. She is a Sufi *shaykha*. She attends conferences and speaks from this position of authority that she has been initiated into by her male *shaykh*, adding that her being a female should not limit her acceptance within the communities she visits and her ability to share in knowledge.

In this singular space and its history two voices of prominent female leaders are represented. They have spoken from two different perspectives of women's relationship to the *masjid* at the Fellowship. These narratives collectively challenge any linear description one can force upon this space. So the *masjid* indeed established gendered norms for the community, especially as a means to mark acceptance within the larger Muslim communities that the *masjid* is situated within, but the institutionalization of it as a space highlights the multiple histories of this space in North America, as seen in Simmons and Maryam Kabeer's reflections. In the institutional and ritual history of the *salat* in this community this detail is critical, especially as the presence of women within the *masjid* created tension for females who felt relegated to the

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<sup>428</sup> Interview with author, home of interviewee, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 9, 2014.

back and at times felt pushed out altogether. It is because of the lack of room in the *masjid* that one often finds women praying in Bawa's room, if they are not able to find space in the *masjid* or if they have children with diapers and not allowed to enter the *masjid*. Furthermore, the space as a whole also created anxiety for the disciples of Bawa because gender was a non-issue for Bawa's relationships with his female disciples prior to its construction. What is visible here are moments of negotiations, between protocols found within Islamic tradition, American women's experiences and relationships with Bawa and their own identity (i.e., gender) while attempting to adhere to traditional Islamic ritual and patriarchal conduct in a particular space (i.e., *masjid*). This has been an ongoing process, a process that is intimately correlated with whether the community is an Islamic one or not. The placement of women and labeling of the Fellowship (either as Sufi or Islamic) are interrelated.<sup>429</sup>

Bawa's attempt to present the *masjid* as a legitimate Muslim prayer space meant that women did not have official authority in this particular space. If the *masjid* were the sole space wherein female authority could be sought, then one would be disappointed. Yet, as studies of women in Sufism have highlighted (Rauvdere 2002, 2003; Schielke 2008) a shift is needed for where one seeks female presences. When one moves from the *masjid* to ancillary spaces in the Fellowship Headquarters, female and male activity is equally observed. Women lead discourse meetings on Sunday mornings, women have access to Bawa's room regularly and women also maintain several administrative positions in varying institutional capacities. Another event that I explored in Chapter 2 that presents an example of the dynamics of the complexity of the role of women within the Fellowship are the *mawlid*s.

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<sup>429</sup> For more on the challenges of labeling the Fellowship please see Chapter 1's subsection *Negotiating Diversity in Sufism in an Age of Islamophobia and Anti-Sufism*.

### *Women at the Mawlid at the Fellowship*

*Mawlid* celebrations are the only other time (aside from *salat* prayers in the *masjid*) when genders are separated in the Fellowship momentarily. For instance, a one-day *mawlid* recitation took place in Bawa's room. It was a special *dua* (intercession) for a senior female disciple of Bawa, who was returning to Sri Lanka for the first time since Bawa's death. I use my field notes to capture what unfolded:

When this *mawlid* started I sat in a corner spot by the sliding door entrance to Bawa's room. Within seconds a male member of the Fellowship executive committee, who was sitting beside me, told me that I was sitting in the male section. I was confused and embarrassed. When I looked around the room I faintly noticed a subtle separation of men and women on either side of Bawa's bed. I was not used to gender separation in Bawa's room, as it was the one room that remained opened to all, and if not, only women occupied it, such as during *mawlid* recitations or *salat* prayers. For most other meetings or events (i.e., baby blessings) there were no gender demarcations.

My experience of the *mawlid* in the Fellowship in Philadelphia provides a vital and similar trend, as found in scholarship of *mawlid*s, especially by Schielke (2008), who have studied female presence in *mawlid*s in Egypt and Katz (2007, 2008) in her study of *mawlid*s in Yemen. Katz highlights that the *mawlid* was historically associated with the "domestic" realm of families and thus women. The latter would be one point of contestation raised in "anti-*mawlid* polemics" as early as the fourteenth century (2008, 468). Katz adds:

The *mawlid* celebration sidestepped issues of ritual purity and mosque access, provided a religiously meaningful framework for women's sociability, and could be incorporated into the life-cycle occasions (such as marriage, childbirth, and death) that punctuated women's lives. The performance of *mawlid*s could be harnessed to the personal and familial concerns (marriage, fertility, and the health of family members) that were often most vital to women. Nevertheless, the *mawlid*'s tenuous religious legitimacy might simultaneously devalue and marginalize the religious efforts of the women who cultivated it (2008, 468).

From Katz's comments above, it is apparent that women's participation in Sufi rituals further garnered negative attention for (1) themselves and for (2) Sufism. Many felt that *mawlid*s were not part of the Sunna of the Prophet and hence were seen as *bid'a* (religious innovation) and so readily labeled it pejoratively as "popular Islam" (Katz 2008). Schielke found in his own research that

Women who are visibly present at *mawlid*s and other public gatherings are often strongly the focus of critical opinions of Sufism and the cult of saints, expressed both in press articles and in the comments of bystanders. People critical of Sufism regularly refer to the presence of women in mixed gatherings as especially scandalous proof of what they see as an immoral and unIslamic nature of these gatherings (Schielke 2008, 105).

In the Fellowship, this mixing is not allowed during the *mawlid*s and women do not lead *mawlid* recitations. Yet the *mawlid* draws a vibrant number of immigrant Muslims from the local



community, most of whom are women. During the heights of *mawlid* celebrations (either for the Prophet Muhammad or for Abdul Qadir Jilani), Bawa's room, where the women congregate, overflows with a range of ethnicities and cultures, be they African-American and Euro-American converts to Islam or Pakistani Muslims. The separation of sexes during an Islamic festival, such as the *mawlid*, may be seen as a reversal of egalitarian practices normally experienced by women of the Fellowship. For women from Muslim lands, such as South Asia, North/East Africa and the Middle East, *mawlid*s are rituals that they may have inherently experienced in their own natal lands within their personal "domestic" realms. This was evident to me when at the conclusion of one *mawlid* recitation for the Prophet Muhammad, an East-African Indian Muslim member of the Fellowship approached me and told me that this was just like stories her mother and aunts used to share with each other when she was a child, ones that male members of her family criticized them for sharing. Not only did she feel the immensity of the *baraka* (blessing) of the *mawlid*, which she experienced for the first time in Philadelphia in Bawa's room, but she also associated it with an experience from her childhood with her mother and aunts.

This one event then presents us with two approaches to gender and Sufism. First, it has historically been associated with women's participation and presence and second, which from purely an American experience of gender, seems to be a reversal of equality of sexes in religious practice. It is such moments of multiple experiences that need to be nuanced in studies of Sufism and gender in America. Gender, as captured within the Fellowship specifically, is a process. It is negotiated and it sits at the crossroads of varying factors. When unpacking these intersections, one sees not binaries of gender inclusion or exclusion, but rather webs, simultaneously existing in negotiation with each other. The role of women in Sufism has also been tied to the question of the authenticity of Sufism as Islamic, which presents a double marginalization for Sufi women,

wherein they must not only assert their Sufi Islam, but they must also affirm their presence in Islam as women who practice Sufism. Such tendencies have been highlighted in historical studies of women in Sufism, and have called attention to women in Sufism in varying localities (i.e., Turkey, Egypt, Senegal, India), but these nuances have yet to be unraveled in North America. Future studies must not abstract the negotiations entailed by women in Sufism; ones that have been diverse, fluid and contextually based. So women's presence is both spatially and ritually dependent in Philadelphia and this is a critical find in itself for studies of Sufism in North America, but Bawa's sites in Jaffna presents further challenges in mapping the role of women in the Fellowship.

### **The Matron and Maryam: Women in Bawa's *Ashram* and Mankumban**

The activities at the *ashram* (Chapter 5) and Mankumban (Chapter 6) presented new localities in which to explore gender and its presence in the communities and spaces of Bawa. The most obvious authority found in Jaffna is the female custodian, the matron of the *ashram* of Bawa. Mauroof (1976) remarks in his study of the *ashram* during his fieldwork that one of the rules of the *ashram* that he found posted when Bawa was away in America was that "[...] the matron of the *ashram* was the final authority in regard to conduct" (48). Even when Bawa was alive he had appointed a "matron" as the caretaker of his home and the caretakers of his *ashram* have been females alone. This can be because of the cultural and social understanding that the female is to perform the role of nurturing and caring for visitors in an *ashram* or hospice. As Schielke highlights, for Sufi teachers

[T]he wives, daughters and female followers of Sufi sheikhs often play an important role in groups, there is usually a gendered distribution of work whereby women take over “female” tasks such as organization and upkeep of the temporary dwelling, cooking, and the reception of guests from the closer circle of friends and relatives, while men lead and organize the rituals, receive visitors, and represent the group to the outside (Schielke 2008, 102-103).

Since Bawa was not known to have had a wife or children, it was possible that this task of “care-taking” (mothering) that Schielke points to was to be completed by a female through the position of a matron. Still any attempts to determine why Bawa specifically choose a matron and not a patron for the *ashram* would be conjecture on my part.

Be that as it may it is the matron who continues to maintain the *ashram* of Bawa. She leads daily prayers at the *ashram*.<sup>430</sup> She even stood up in a position of authority before the community during *jum‘ah/poosai* in Mankumban. Since those who are present for “*jum‘ah*” on Friday do not participate in *salat* with the imam, it can be suggested that it is the matron who leads the community in prayer, as they sit and face the tomb dedicated to Maryam. Importantly her role in relation to the *ashram* is in keeping with the studies found above in South Asia, which attribute female authoritative presence in “ancillary spaces” in Sufism. These include shrines and smaller spaces that are part of larger nodes in the network of Sufi communities. In her role as the matron of the *ashram*, she greets North American visitors; she tends to the upkeep of Bawa’s room in the shrine and leads in the meal preparation at both the *ashram* and Mankumban. She leads daily prayers at the *ashram*, which includes the singing of the *Engal Bawa* and *salawat* to

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<sup>430</sup> Please see Chapter 5’s subsection on *Ritual Activities and Personal Piety in Bawa’s Ashram* and Chapter 6’s *Faith and Piety: Legacies of Bawa and His Communities in Post-War Jaffna* for more on how the matron played a ritual role.

the Prophet Muhammad. In addition to the matron who resides in the *ashram*, her proximity to Mankumban presents further intrigue.

Mankumban is a *masjid-mazar* complex dedicated to Maryam. It is treated as a shrine much more than as a *masjid*. Even though daily prayers take place, individuals and groups of international pilgrims arrive to venerate and perform personal acts of devotion at the tomb to honour both Maryam and Bawa. Mankumban, both as a *masjid* and shrine, is open to females and males. Where females are usually not permitted to enter *masjids* in Sri Lanka, women can freely enter Mankumban, without much restriction in attire. During my fieldwork at Mankumban, since people were of diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds, women, and men for that matter, dressed in different apparels. Some Muslim women wore long black *abayas* (cloak) but only loosely veiled, while some Hindu women wore long skirts to just above their ankles, with short sleeves and loosely covered their head or did not cover at all. Where in Philadelphia the position of women in the *masjid* or the attire that they wore spoke to the creation of gendered spaces, in Jaffna at the *ashram* and Mankumban different tendencies are seen altogether. It is only during Friday prayers that men and women sit side by side at Mankumban. When meals are served after prayers, they are done with all males and then all females in the adjacent hall to Mankumban; everyone sits on the floor and eats. Between both the *ashram* and Mankumban, it is female presence that is regularly visible in those who help prepare meals and serve visitors. During the preparation for the breaking of fast during Ramadan, it was predominantly women who assisted the matron of the *ashram* prepare *kanji* (rice soup). For daily prayers at the *ashram*, women frequented them more and they occupied the space immediately in front of Bawa's bed where the matron stood, while the men were off to the side.

Similarly to the Fellowship in Philadelphia, all of Bawa's devotees are actively involved regardless of gender. They dedicate their time to helping with the institutions and any activities. It is the service that is given to Bawa. From Philadelphia to Jaffna, there is no difference between genders in this realm of regular service. The imams in both *masjids* that were constructed by Bawa are males. However, it is the matron in the *ashram* of Bawa that stands as an authority figure, the likes of which cannot be recognized in Philadelphia. Individual ancillary male and female leaders have emerged in Philadelphia, and in branches across North America (i.e., in Toronto). They sit on various committees and take part in leading their branch. The only figure that stands as a formal female authority in Philadelphia is *shaykha* Maryam Kabeer. She is now a Sufi teacher in her own right, yet those in the Fellowship do not recognize her leadership as such officially. When she attends the Fellowship, she attends as a devotee as all others. In this regard, no one has the same caliber of authority and presence as the matron of the *ashram*. All of Bawa's disciples, regardless of the position they hold in the community, are seen as equals amongst each other. The matron at the *ashram* is treated with respect because of her devotion to Bawa but she is still seen just as a disciple of Bawa and not necessarily a spiritual leader.

If the matron is one female presence that stands out amidst Bawa's spaces, it is Mankumban, then, that forms a noteworthy space across Bawa's transnational movement. No parallel shrine to Maryam is found in the American context. Of course Bawa's *mazar* is the parallel pilgrimage and shrine site. At the *mazar* of Bawa, I highlighted further gender dynamics, in Chapter 3. During one of my field visits, for instance, when I walked outside the *mazar*, I saw women standing outside on the footpath and grass praying. They did not go into the *mazar* at all. Some women do not go into the *mazar*, maybe due to concerns of purity (i.e., being on their menses) or because of their particular interpretations of *mazar* practices as defined by their own

local contexts. The particular gender norms practiced by new visitors and immigrant members, especially at the *mazar* of Bawa in Coatesville, means that they implement their own gender and cultural practices.

During individual visits, though, the *mazar* space is free of any gendered boundaries or restrictions. Visitors who are not official members of the Fellowship create their own practices and conduct in this sacred space as long as it is respectful. Similarly to Bawa's room in Philadelphia, Bawa's *mazar* during times of ritual commemoration (i.e., *urs* and *mawlid*s), gender separation is maintained. All the men sit on one side and all the women on the other but this is a rather fluid arrangement, as the *mazar* is a small open space. Though these practices of gender separation are similar in both *mazars* the dedication of a shrine to Maryam by Bawa is essential, especially when taken in light of the feminine in the cosmology of Sufi traditions.

### *The Height of Femininity: Maryam in Classical Sufism*

In the Qur'an Maryam, the mother of Isa (Jesus) is the only female who is mentioned by name. There are seventy verses of the Qur'an that refer to Maryam.<sup>431</sup> Her name is mentioned in thirty-four of these. These references to Maryam in the Qur'an have resulted in a rich tradition of Qur'anic exegesis (*tasfir*). Many scholars and theologians have debated Maryam's role as a prophet in line with other prophetic figures of the Abrahamic traditions. The Muslim jurist Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 765)<sup>432</sup> a Shi'a imam, writes in his Qur'anic commentaries that Maryam's role is significant for her absolute servanthship (Mayer 2011). Her womb was the sacred vessel that

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<sup>431</sup> Sayeed, Asma. "Mary." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*. Oxford Islamic Studies Online, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com.libproxy.wlu.ca/article/opr/t236/e1197> (Accessed 22-Jun-2015).

<sup>432</sup> Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 765) is the sixth imam of the Shi'a Muslims. He is known as a great scholar, jurist and transmitter of hadith not only for Shi'a traditions but also for Sunnis and Sufis. To him is attributed the prominent Shi'a school of law or the Jafari school. Abu Hanifah, who created the Hanifi School of law studied with him. From Ja'far's progeny come the two prominent Shi'a traditions of the Ismailis (Seveners) and the Ithna'Ashari (Twelvers). Amongst Sufi circles he is perceived as a *Qutb* or axial pole.

brought forth the “divine-logos” or the “*nabi-kalimah*” (prophet-logos). Ja‘far comprehends her role as a prophet (Mayer 2011, liii). Her status as prophet is necessary to his “interfaced-hierarchy” that is developed as part of God’s “divine display” of Light which “erupts in a powerfully whirling vortex: Mary, Muhammad, Abraham, Moses, Joseph, all ‘muhammad’ [praised] perfect ‘*ubudiyah*, reascending to *rububiyah* whence they poured down” (Mayers 2011, liv). Mary is a prophet, whose status is among those of Muhammad, Abraham and Moses.

The Andalusian jurist Ibn Hazam (d. 1064) claimed that Maryam, along with Moses’ mother and Asiyah (the wife of the Pharaoh) were all said to be prophets (Sands 2006). Maryam is a paradigmatic example of a servant of Allah. A servanthip that was solidified even prior to her physical birth by Hanna, Maryam’s mother, who consecrated Maryam to Allah while she was in her womb (Sands 2006). Many traditions developed, particularly in mystical Islam that portrayed Maryam as the soul in complete submission to Allah, for similar reasons Maryam has also been given the status of a saint. Though these theological debates of the exact nature of the status of Maryam persist in Islamic scholarship and commentary, in Islamic mystical traditions Maryam is distinctively married within a cosmological and metaphysical discourse. She becomes one of the exemplars of the nature of the *feminine ideal*, an ideal that led Attar of Nishapur (d. 1220), the Persian poet and biographer, to write

[...] the holy prophets have laid it down that ‘God does not look upon your outward forms.’ It is not the outward form that matters, but the inner purpose of the heart, as the Prophet said, ‘the people are assembled [on the Day of Judgment] according to the purposes of their hearts’...So also ‘Abbas of Tus said that when on the Day of Resurrection the summons goes forth, ‘O men,’ the first person to set foot in the class of

men [i.e., those who are to enter Paradise] will be Maryam, upon whom be peace”  
(quoted in Smith 1994, 59).

The above source has been significant in engaging with the presence of women in Sufism historically and in contemporary contexts in terms of the gendered ways of being upon the *tariqa* (path in Sufism). That it was indeed possible to be a woman following the path to Sufism, as Maryam becomes the exemplar of one who did. In Sufi traditions many women in classical periods aspired to the ideal state of Maryam or were associated with her, especially as seen in portrayals of Rabi‘a al-‘Adawiyya, who is mentioned in the *Memorial of the Friends of God* by Attar. Rabi‘a was the “[...] one accepted by men as a second spotless Mary” (quoted in Smith 1994, 21). This is captured seminally in the work of the Arab Andalusian Sufi mystic and philosopher Ibn ‘Arabi. For Ibn ‘Arabi, Maryam becomes, as Henry Corbin writes in his commentary of Ibn ‘Arabi, “the feminine [who is] invested with the active creative function in the image of the divine sophia” (1969, 162). This *sophia* (wisdom) is necessary to participate in the “dialectic of love” and so sophia (Maryam) is “theophany par excellence” resulting in her manifestation of the divine qualities of “Beauty” and “Compassion” (1969, 145). Corbin continues

That is why feminine being is the Creator of the most perfect thing that can be, for through it is completed the design of Creation, namely, to invest the respondent, the *fedeled’amore*, with a divine Name in a human being who becomes its vehicle. That is why the relation of Eve to Adam represented in exoteric exegeses could not satisfy the theophanic function of feminine being: it was necessary that feminine being should accede to the rank



assigned by the quaternity [group of four], in which Maryam takes the rank of creative Sophia (1969, 164).

Thus, where Eve and Adam represented “exoteric exegeses” according to interpretations by Ibn ‘Arabi, Muhammad and Maryam complete the quaternity, the primordial and eternal cosmic plan.

For the Iranian poet and mystic Ruzbihan Baqli (d. 1209), Maryam’s significance was the “meeting of the human and the divine: divine disclosure (*tajalli*) and clothing (*libas*)” and this disclosure meant that for some Sufis her life could be paralleled to the example of Musa and Khidr, for Khidr had access to knowledge that Musa did not (Sands 2006, 108). In such interpretations, Maryam is no longer only the mother of Isa, a model of chastity, purity and an exemplar of absolute servitude to God, but her role according to these esoteric thinkers can only be seen wholly when understood in the larger cosmic plan. Maryam’s perfected status (*kamal*) is dependent on her being the fulfillment of the necessary creative feminine that God needs to complete creation. For Sufi mystics, then, Mary comes to represent the ideal feminine theophany.

It is these metaphysical interpretations of the cosmic Maryam that resulted in the growth of visitation to her tombs or sites associated with her particularly by Muslims. Maryam in Islamic mystical traditions draws attention to various interpretational approaches (Sands 2006; Schleifer 1997; Thurlkill 2007). These traditions have resulted in embodied practices in which visitations to sites associated with Maryam are also common practices across many regions, a feature shared by both Christians and Muslims alike (Keriakos 2012; Albera and Couroculi 2012). Churches dedicated to the Virgin Mary are sometimes shared spaces between Christian

and Muslim followers, as evident at the shrine to Mary in Ephesus, Turkey or in Haram ash-Sharif (the Noble Sanctuary) in Jerusalem. As Aliah Schleifer (1997)<sup>433</sup> writes

From the perspective of the classical Muslim scholars, Mary, in the Qur'an and Sunna, is a symbol that brings together all revelation. As a descendent of the great Israelite prophets, the bearer of the word, the mother of Jesus, and as traditional Sunni Islam's chosen women of all the worlds, Mary is symbolic of the Qur'anic message that revelation has not been confined to one particular people. This symbolism is embodied in the placement of part of 3:37 above many a prayer-niche (*mihrab*), including that of the Juyushi Mosque, one of the oldest Fatimid mosques in Cairo (100).

And it is perhaps the latter synergy of Maryam across Christian and Islamic traditions and her metaphysical role in creation that appealed to Bawa in his relationship and understanding of her. For even in Mankumban apparent are the religiously diverse visitors to Maryam's shrine. She is the essence of "God's House" and it is because of her memorialization at Mankumban, that it is understood as a place of "pure prayer."

Bawa's own teachings of Maryam is captured in Michael Green's<sup>434</sup> book, *One Song: A New Illuminated Rumi* (2005):

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<sup>433</sup> Aliah Schleifer is a former Professor of Islamic Studies at the American University of Cairo and has lived, worked and studied in the Middle East for nearly three decades. Her book on Maryam is based on her doctoral dissertation, which she completed at the University of Exeter in England. She is also the author of *Motherhood in Islam* (1996). Her area of interests in Islamic studies included Qur'anic commentary, Islamic jurisprudence, prophetic traditions, Morisco studies and Islamic mysticism.

<sup>434</sup> Michael Green is a disciple of Bawa who encountered him through his connections with Jonathan Granoff, when they met in Woodstock, New York. He was the designer of the *mazar* of Bawa in Pennsylvania. He has worked extensively with Coleman Barks and together they have published popular renditions of the Sufi poet Jalal ad-Din Rumi (d. 1273), these best-selling works have included *the Illuminated Rumi* (1997 Crown Publishing Group) and

Our Father's overflowing grace, and the radiant light which emerged within it became a fruit that oozed into radiant Mary. It became a jewel for the world. It appeared at the beginning of creation and became the life within all lives in the eternal world. It appeared in the beginning of creation and existed as a realm in the Universe of the Soul. It became the treasure, the soul. It became the treasure, the soul. Finally, it became the symbolic form of Jesus, it became the symbol of Jesus (Bawa quoted in Green 2005, 34).

In this understanding, Maryam is a cosmological principle that existed prior to creation, also continues to manifest as the "soul" of creation. Moreover, Maryam is also a historical perfected personage that brought forth the divine soul (Jesus) is in the trajectory of the metaphysical understandings of Maryam as expressed by many Sufi personalities. One such similarity in understanding can be seen in Rumi's *Fihī ma fih (It Is What It Is)* in which he writes "[...] It is suffering that leads to success in every instance. As long as Maryam did not feel the pangs of childbirth, she did not go beneath the palm tree (Koran XIX: 23-26). This body is like Maryam, and each of us has a Christ within him; if the suffering of love rises in us, our Christ will be born."<sup>435</sup>

During a question and answer session that took place on April 16, 1976 in Toronto, Canada, Bawa provides details of the conception of Jesus, the spirit of God, through Maryam. After relaying the narrative of the archangel Jibril blowing the "holy spirit" or breath of God into Mary to conceive Jesus, Bawa asks the question "who is Mary, who is Mary?" (Muhaiyaddeen, April 16, 1976). In his response to this question, Bawa distinguishes between the "form" that is

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*One Song* (2005 Running Press Publishers). For more information about Michael Green and his works please see <http://michaelgreenarts.com> (Accessed August 15, 2015).

<sup>435</sup> Translation from Nicholson in Henry Corbin's *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* (1969) pp. 347 footnote 70.

known as Mary, according to the narratives found in Christianity and Islam as being the mother of Jesus, with the essence of what Mary represents. He goes on to explain that Maryam is the “strength of God [...] the duty of God [...] the love of God” (Muhaiyaddeen, April 16, 1976). She was the one who “surrendered” and because of her complete surrender to the will of God, she is a “symbol” or “sign” of God (Muhaiyaddeen, April 16, 1976). This state of Maryam is reached through “wisdom” which allows the seeker to distinguish it from its “form” (Muhaiyaddeen, April 16, 1976). Bawa’s interpretation of the significance of Maryam in this particular discourse aligns with previous Sufis, such as Rumi, who conceive of Maryam as a metaphysical ideal and state of being which is timeless, in addition to her role as the mother of Jesus as a historical personage. Of course in my initial study of Bawa, it has been difficult to assess the exact relationship between Maryam and Bawa. In the narratives that I came across from disciples of Bawa, mainly in Sri Lanka, there is a sense that there was a real encounter between Maryam and Bawa in a historical and metaphysical sense. The essence that is Bawa (i.e., the *Qutb*) met and offered refuge to Maryam at a time of need. At the same time, as noted above, there is also a deeply metaphysical significance of Maryam to Bawa, especially as it has manifested in the dedication of a shrine to her. These dynamics need further exploration.

In Philadelphia most are apprehensive to speak about Mankumban and its relationship to Maryam. Many felt that this was “too far-fetched.” In all the publications of the Fellowship, there are hardly any references to Maryam/Mary, beyond her historical reality as the mother of Jesus. But Maryam is a significant cosmological principle in Sufism, one that is found in Bawa’s teachings on Maryam mentioned above and embodied in the shrine commemorated to her by Bawa. At least in the discourse of Bawa on Mankumban and the Philadelphia *masjid* entitled, “Bawa’s Vision of Mankumban and Philadelphia Mosques” (Muhaiyaddeen August 24, 1979),

there is no mention of Maryam. Still in this discourse he parallels both of his *masjids* as symbols of paradise and as an *axis mundi*. If Mankumban and the *masjid* in Philadelphia are both “God’s House” and are representative of heaven, then Maryam’s memorial tomb in Mankumban is representational. She is a vessel that guards the threshold to the ultimate sphere of divinity. She signifies the exemplary state of a human being and just as the Prophet Muhammad was viewed as a light that existed before creation, Maryam, it may be, also exists as a similar reality for Bawa. Both are principles of *insan al-kamil* and states of being that Bawa challenged all his disciples to strive for, regardless of religious affiliations.

For the disciples of Bawa her commemoration at Mankumban is without a doubt a reality. Mankumban is the first known institution that Bawa ever built. His *ashram* was his place of residence, but Bawa sought this particular property on Mankumban specifically because of its connection to Maryam. The Tamil disciples laid the structural foundation but it was the American disciples who arrived in Jaffna who helped to complete the building. Numerous disciples, both from Sri Lanka and from North America, have spoken of mystical experiences with Maryam.<sup>436</sup> Mankumban serves many purposes. It is the site of daily and weekly performance of Islamic prayers. This is because there is an imam in residence who completes his prayers. Local Hindus also join, not for *salat*, but rather for their own prayers, which consists of the singing of the *salawat* to the Prophet Muhammad and *Engal Bawa* (Our Bawa). It is a site where Hindus commemorate deities such as Murukan, by lighting and decorating the shrine with small clay oil-lamps for varying festivals throughout the year. However, the practices of devotion to Maryam, regardless of whether she is understood to be literally entombed there or commemorated, call attention to a critical detail. In the Jaffna sites of Bawa, though male

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<sup>436</sup> Please see Chapter 6’s subsection *A Masjid-Mazar Complex to Maryam and Bawa: Mankumban*.

ancillary leaders and presence are notable, such as that of the imam, who is active in ritual performance, the shrine to Maryam forms the axis of devotional activity.

From a metaphysical level, Mankumban is suggestive, particularly when taken in light of the overall ministry of Bawa. Maryam in Sufism and Islam is understood as the vessel that contained the Word of God (Isa/Jesus or *Kalimat Allah*) and also the example of the life of complete “surrender” to the will of God. Bawa, in his ministries, signaled this one critical teaching. He instructed his disciples to be vessels of God (God-Man, Man-God) through the instructions of *dhikr* or the *kalimah* that he gave his disciples or even through his own state of perfected being.<sup>437</sup> Thus, the pure state of prayer, God’s House or Mankumban as it has been called by varying members of Bawa’s communities and its dedication to the Maryam, more than any other prophetic figure is paramount.

For those interested in gender in Sufism and specifically of gender and Sufism in North America, this is a valuable detail. Mankumban in Jaffna opens up Bawa’s esoteric milieu and his relationship with Maryam, which is not readily apparent in his North American sites. Gender, especially through spaces, is fluid and dynamic. Moments of gender separation and non-separation, moments of female leadership and lack thereof calls attention to a continual process of gender in the Fellowship, it is not static, but organic and ever changing. Importantly, it is a process that also has origins prior to Bawa’s arrival in Philadelphia in Jaffna. The presence of female devotees, and female led activities in the *ashram* summon a critical reassessment of the assertion that one of the facets of Sufism in North America is its adaptation to gender norms of the “west.” It appears with the Fellowship that this is not necessarily the case. Even in considering the loosely demarcated gendered spaces at Mankumban during *jum‘ah* and at the

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<sup>437</sup> Please see Chapter 7’s subsection *From Swami to Qutb: the Many Titles of Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen* for a discussion of *insan al-kamil*.

*ashram*, where women sit at the front and lead the prayers (and the only time when they are not permitted to visit is when they are on their menses), it still appears that women are actively involved in Bawa's Sri Lankan sites.

For a Sufi community with distinct "American roots," the Fellowship and its construction of the *masjid* has led to a process of Islamisation, resulting in gender specific conduct (i.e., veiling, gender separation etc.), that was illustrated in other Islamic rituals such as the *mawlid*s. Prior to the construction of the *masjid*, women were active in Bawa's life and they continue to be active at present. As the Fellowship as a whole has showcased, these tendencies of gender norms co-exist with each other, in their respective sub-spaces. Taken as a whole, they constitute the Fellowship, not one or the other. So though women may not be leaders in the *masjid*, they are leaders in the Fellowship during Sunday morning discourse meetings and they are active participants in Islamic and Fellowship activities. This presence of female leadership in the Fellowship on Sunday morning cannot be deemed as unique to America, because in Jaffna, where Bawa's ministry originated, not only was a matron found leading the prayers at Bawa's *ashram*. But one of the most climatic nodes in the networks of Bawa's spaces was mapped, a shrine to Maryam. It is at this juncture that I am reminded of Pemberton's remarks about the "large gap between rhetoric and reality" as it relates to women in ritual life in Islam (Pemberton 2000, 21). In shifting locales and sites and starting again with new bearings, new stories and rituals, especially of previously marginalized voices, are unearthed. From Maryam to the matron in Jaffna, to the process of gender and its spaces in the Fellowship in Philadelphia, it was apparent that women have remained seminal actors and participants, leaders and exemplary beings in Bawa's ministries transnationally. They have been there all along.

## Conclusions

From its formative era to its continual development and transformation in modern global contexts, women's involvement has been a barometer with which to measure "inauthenticity" or "authenticity" of Sufism. Women's presence within shrine cultures and subsequent spaces associated with Sufi *shaykhs* have troubled those who have understood that women were meant to maintain private domains and not public ones. These same negotiations are taking place within the North American context. Within the North American milieu in which all Sufi communities are plagued with the question of "authenticity" (i.e., whether it is Sufi or not and Islamic or not), varying Sufi communities are individually negotiating with the sense of American "gender justice" that Hermansen points to.

What I have aimed to highlight, though, in this chapter with my analysis of women in the Fellowship is that studies of American Sufi communities and women's presence need to engage with the process of gendering. Philadelphia was useful as it signaled how spaces are gendered, usually towards women during rituals, such as the *mawlid*. Still, this example is not a simple dichotomy of women being excluded or included, but rather it depends on who is experiencing a ritual and how. In this chapter I also began to unpack these complexities of female presences and spaces not only in the Fellowship in Philadelphia, but also of the Circle in Jaffna. Calling attention to the regular female activity and involvement, just as in Philadelphia, but also of the role of the matron at the *ashram* and significantly to the shrine dedicated to Maryam. These sites then present new lens with which to assess the experience of women and their roles in the Fellowship in Philadelphia. I highlighted similarities and differences between these spaces of how women are involved and how spaces become gendered. I found that women were present through these networks of Bawa's communities, but also discovered that women's authority and



presence, as located in the matron of the *ashram* and Mankumban, are not evident comparably in Philadelphia. The memorialization of a shrine to Maryam is a distinguishing space, as it represents a figure and principle in Sufism that is revered as the height of femininity, one that was only located in Sri Lanka, and not in North America.

Our final chapter explores one of the most important issues that pertain to both Bawa's communities in Pennsylvania and Jaffna. With no appointed successor for the Fellowship and the Circle, Bawa remains the metaphysical leader. His charismatic leadership meant unity of diversity (i.e., religiously, culturally, socially etc.), thus how do the varying members, devotees and pilgrims now come to understand what the Fellowship is and its purpose? In their understandings, especially formal members of the Fellowship, how do they envision the Fellowship to develop solely based on Bawa's spiritual authority? Definitions of what the Fellowship is require an engagement with questions of authority. Such issues will not only be of interest to scholars of Sufism in North America and religious studies, but also members of the Fellowship who are now at a crossroads of trying to maintain unity without the physical form of the charismatic teacher to lead the way.

## Chapter 9

### “The Pond”: Envisioning the Fellowship in a Post-Charismatic Era

#### Introduction

Nearly three decades after the physical passing of Bawa his communities are at the crossroads of institutional identities. Upon Bawa’s arrival in Philadelphia, his followers instituted by-laws for the Fellowship for legal purposes, which would be revised several times (Mauroof 1976, 71). In this process, Bawa appointed three presidents, three secretaries and three treasurers. Mauroof writes, “the charismatic authority of Bawa, however, was not in place of a bureaucratic one, but existed along with it” (1976, 78). At present, Bawa’s institutions are led by his immediate (senior) students. They serve as caretakers of spaces (i.e., the *mazar*, the farm), prayer leaders (i.e., imam) and hold formal administrative positions in the Executive Committee, such as Presidents, Secretaries and Treasurers. The matron in the *ashram* remains a unique non-official authoritative figure, discussed in the Chapter 8. Still, these institutional leaders hold a certain influence in defining the trajectory of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship (BMF) and the Serendib Sufi Study Circle (SSSC).

The aging demographic of the senior students of Bawa and its numerous branches means that within the next few decades, for the Fellowship and the Circle, some, or maybe even most, of the leadership will not consist of members who knew and sat with Bawa personally. This of course has been a developmental phase that all religious communities have struggled through. One need not search much further than to the issues of successorship that developed immediately after the death of Prophet Muhammad and even more so after the passing of his early companions. With the passing of a charismatic leader, the question of successorship remains ever pertinent.

In terms of the Fellowship in Philadelphia, the Headquarters of the movement in North America, questions remain as to who will hold positions of administrative authority and become prayer leaders and caretakers of the shrines and farms within the Fellowship? Will they be the children of the currently appointed leaders, signaling in an era of hereditary appointments? Or will they be new members who are steadfastly devoted to Bawa, some of whom are immigrants with an inherited Muslim identity? In short, what is the future of Bawa's ministries?

In this chapter I explore these vast, sensitive and significant questions that are wholeheartedly riddling the communities of Bawa. I do this based on my initial recognition of the patterns of continuities, transformations and transmissions of Bawa's teachings across his network of communities. I first situate the by-laws that formally establish the legal and official parameters of the Fellowship and the Circle. Then I explore the voices of some of the senior students in the Fellowship as they express their understandings of what the Fellowship is. I conclude by exploring future possibilities for the communities of Bawa, by paying close attention to the roles that young people and new members in the community may play. In doing this, I highlight a discourse given by Bawa to his disciples at a time of tension within his Fellowship in Philadelphia while he was away in Sri Lanka. This discourse entitled "The Pond" (1972) is what I evoke in the title of this chapter.

In this discourse Bawa compares the Fellowship to a pond, which provides water (Truth) to all who need it. This symbol captures the essence of what Bawa intended the Fellowship and his ministries to be. The Fellowship was to be a pond of spirituality without exclusion. A pond is an ecosystem that nourishes diverse creatures due to access of water; Bawa is the water and the pond is the Fellowship that contains Bawa. The realization of the pond as the Fellowship is the actualization of unity and peace as universal principles accessible to all. The "pond" also evokes

diversity; many from all walks of life arrive at the Fellowship for varying purposes and relate to Bawa, Sufism, Islam, Hinduism and many other religious and spiritual traditions individually. Thus all who visit the pond/Fellowship have a purpose and a place and collectively they give meaning to the Fellowship and the Circle.

### **Defining the Purpose of the Fellowship**

#### *The Preamble to the By-Laws of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship of Philadelphia*

The by-laws of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, known as Guru Bawa Fellowship of Philadelphia, state that the founder and chief executive of the Fellowship is Bawa. He is referred to as “His Holiness” in this document (1979, 4). In “Article III: Purpose and Function” there are three notable sections that express what the Fellowship is. The first two are of significance as one sets out to establish some possible understandings of what the Fellowship is from an institutional and administrative level.

Two types of objectives are listed, one that relates to internal (within the Fellowship) and another that relates to external (beyond the Fellowship). “Section I: Internal Objective” states:

The purpose of this Fellowship is to inculcate in man the Wisdom of teachings and the example of His Holiness, which reveals the purpose of the creation of man, makes known the birthright of True man, discloses the present conditions of man, and answers the fundamental questions: Who is Man? Who is God? What is the relationship between God and Man? The goal of the True Man shall be to know his Self through Divine Wisdom, to discover the Secrets that are within the Self, to know the nature of the Soul

within, to know God Who is Life within life, and to merge in God and become God-Man, Man-God (1979, 5).

Notable immediately is that the legal and formal “Internal Objective” of the Fellowship encapsulates the core teaching of Bawa.<sup>438</sup> Bawa’s teaching of the *insan al-kamil* or “God-Man, Man-God” was central to his ministry. Many disciples see Bawa as the example of this state of being, a state of being that he encouraged all his followers to achieve. The cultivation of wisdom through the teachings of Bawa is the internal purpose of the Fellowship.

Article III also includes a section on “External Objectives.” They are listed as the following:

- A. Promotion of the study, understanding, and realization of God’s Truth among all who seek Truth through the teachings and example of His Holiness.
- B. The compilation, translation, publication, and dissemination of the principles and practices of Truth as are or may be expounded by His Holiness. (The publication of research works, reports, or material pertaining to the Truth as expounded by His Holiness as are or may be forthcoming from the scholarship or personal insight of any member of the Fellowship may only be carried out with the prior permission of His Holiness or the successor(s). The emphasis on these writings should be confined to God and the Guru’s teachings.)

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<sup>438</sup> Please see Chapter 7’s subsection on *Insan kamil* for more discussion on this topic.

- C. Generally, the carrying out of all such works, matters, or things as may be necessary to attain the aforesaid objectives, including raising moneys to defray costs and expenses encountered in accomplishing those objectives.
- D. Helping all Human Beings to embrace all of mankind with Love and Compassion without any separations or distinctions (1979, 5).

The “External Objectives” differ from “Internal Objectives” in terms of administrative function. In the “External Objectives” one sees the promotion of the “study” and “research” of both “God’s Truth” and of the teachings of Bawa (i.e., “His Holiness”). One also finds the outline for the process of the translation and publication of sources, along with the promotion of activities to alleviate the incursion of debts or costs. Finally though, there is the summation to welcome those who come without any discrimination and only to serve with “Love and Compassion.” Within the formal and legal constitution of the Fellowship, one that was reportedly authorized by Bawa, but of course not written by him personally as he was said to be illiterate, one finds no specific mention of religious or spiritual orientations. The promotion of “the study of wisdom” as it is written and included in the constitution, is the mandate of the Fellowship.

#### *Appointing of Future Leaders: Established Leadership of the By-Laws*

In “Article IV: Administration” the structure of the governing body is set out and it consists of the following:

The Chief Executive (Bawa Muhaiyaddeen)

The Executive Committee

The Board of Trustees

The General Council (1973, 6).

According to some members, Bawa initially disbanded this particular hierarchy of the Fellowship in Philadelphia. Bawa hoped to revise the by-laws and restructure it due to ongoing tensions that had already developed during Bawa's tenure. Bawa was never able to reform the by-laws as his health declined and he eventually passed away, leaving no formal establishment for the Fellowship, which led members to re-institute the structure. Hanal Thambi explained this to me

[...] but even with the present people in the Fellowship, who run the organization, they are definitely [...] they're not all on the same page. It seems like a very dysfunctional group of a [...] people on the committee. But you know Bawa said way back when that he had to change it you know like change it, and so he disbanded it and after they re-banded themselves. So he never, for whatever reasons, he never reconstituted the Executive Committee. So these were people who were on it and you know before and even though he disbanded it, I guess they had to re-band it to have something going on.

With the reinstitution of the Fellowship structure, and no chief executive to act as the singular leader, it was the Executive Committee that bore the weight of leading the Fellowship, at least legally and administratively.

As it stands the Chief Executive's function and duties are

All executive, legislative, and other measures of the Fellowship shall emanate from and shall be totally under the control of its Founder and Chief Executive, His Holiness M. R. Sheikh Muhaiyaddeen Guru Bawa, until such as he appoints (a) successor (s) for this task. All office bearers and members of the governing body shall be appointed solely by him or his successor(s). He reserves sole right to remove any of his appointed office bearers or members of the governing body. No one may be removed from office without his written approval (Section 2, A 1979, 6).

The Chief Executive maintains the sole right to appoint any new members to the Executive Committee.

The Executive Committee consists of a “certain number of Presidents, Secretaries and Treasurers.” These individuals were all appointed by Bawa prior to his death, disbanded and then were (self) re-instated after his passing. This core group maintains the administrative authority of the Fellowship, along with the board of trustees and the general council. The Executive Committee then consists of three presidents, three secretaries and three treasurers. Within these positions, it is usually the senior president, secretary and treasurer who are legally required for signatures of official documents. If a senior committee member of a position is not available then the second and subsequently the third person keeping the position within these posts will assume the responsibilities. They all together form the Executive Committee. In the case of the “By-Laws of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship of Philadelphia” it was signed by Bawa (as Chief Executive), Robert F. Demby (Senior President), Carolyn Pessolano (Executive Secretary) and F. Richard Miller, Jr (or Imam Miller as Executive Treasurer) and was dated March 15, 1973. Of these individuals both Bawa Muhaiyaddeen and the first Senior President, Robert F. Demby



(Khwaja Muhaiyaddeen) have passed away.<sup>439</sup> The Chief of Executive will remain Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, while the Senior President is Musa Muhaiyaddeen, who we here from below.

For instance, of the seven listed duties of “the office of president” they include convening “regular and emergency meetings” by notifying all members, Executive Committee, board of trustees and general council. It is also this individual(s)’ job to “conduct the affairs of the Fellowship without racial or other prejudices, in an impartial manner according to the Divine Qualities. They should adopt the Divine Qualities and listen to their conscience and extend compassion to all and conduct the affairs of the Fellowship according to these noble ideas” (Section 2, C, 1:e). Additionally the “presidents are particularly responsible for enacting decisions/rules the Fellowship may adopt. They must do this in a “Compassionate, Forbearant and Loving manner” (Section 2, C, 1:g).

The Office of the Secretary, discussed in Section 2 part C:2 consists mainly of administrative duties, such as maintaining minutes for meetings, enrolling new members, signing documents and maintaining archival material on Bawa’s discourses in the Fellowship. The secretary is also responsible for handling the letters from members that may be sent to the Executive Committee and helping to resolve any issues. I discuss the process of letter writing further below.

The responsibility of the Board of Trustees is the following:

1. When the Fellowship acquires buildings, real estate, or other substantial assets, the Chief Executive shall appoint members from the General Council to serve as Trustees to make

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<sup>439</sup> There are two subsequent amendments to the original documents. One signed for March 19, 1973, with all the same leaders except the secretary signature is by Charles Hurwitz. This document pertains to “Article II: Period of Existence.” And a further amendment to the by-laws with regards to “Decision-Making” was added on August 25, 1979. On the copy that I accessed, the document contained no signatures.

decisions regarding property and to serve as custodians of the property, providing for its care and maintenance.

2. A President, Secretary, and Treasurer appointed by His Holiness shall be present at each meeting of the Board of Trustees and shall have membership in that body.
3. All decisions and deliberations of the Board of Trustees are subject to the approval of the Chief Executive (1973, 12).

The Board of Trustees then maintains another body of power that specifically controls any “assets” especially in terms of the properties of the Fellowship, while they must do this in consultation with Bawa, but also the Executive Committee.

In all these tiers, it is the General Council that serves as a forum that maintains a critical responsibility. Bawa initially appointed all members of the General Council on a “semi-annual” basis, while requests for removal were to be written to the Secretary who would try to solve the issue prior to bringing it before the Executive Committee (1973, 13). Importantly though in Section E of “Article IV: Administration” the following is stated:

2. The General Council shall be the Forum for the discussion of any matter of importance to the Fellowship, including membership policy, the powers, duties, function and conduct of various members of the governing body, the procedure to be observed during meetings, the transaction of the business of the Fellowship, the determination of the rate of membership dues and the collection of same, and in general, the achieve of the Fellowship’s objectives.

3. All members of the General Council shall be responsible for bringing any sources of dissatisfaction, worry, doubt, or any other apparent problems which may be causing pain in the hearts of any of the members of the Fellowship to the attention of the Secretary of the Fellowship, so that the Secretary may resolve the problem or inform the Presidents, and if necessary, the Executive Committee of the nature of the problem.
4. All members of the Executive Committee, all Trustees, all Branch Senior Presidents, all Branch Executive Secretaries and Executive Treasurers, and others appointed by the Chief Executive shall constitute the membership of the General Council (1973, 14).

The hierarchies that form the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship consist of different individuals within the community (senior students) but also members who hold positions in varying branches (i.e., Toronto or Boston), along with the General Council. The General Council is the forum responsible for dealing with “any sources of dissatisfaction, worry, doubt, or any other apparent problems, which may be causing pain in the hearts of any of the members of the Fellowship,” (1973, 14). Still appointments are to be completed by Bawa.

The by-laws state in the “Dissolution” Section 2 that “thereafter it shall not be dissolved without consent of the person or persons whom he appoints to success him. Dissolution should not be considered unless all other resources fail” (1979, 4). Evident in this statement alone is that a successor to the authority of Bawa was at least a legal possibility. Some members told me off the record that they thought Bawa was actually priming two possible candidates who could have been successors but these members died before Bawa. This of course is not held by most, though a legal successor(s) was a possibility, but there was no such appointment. Initially, I thought that the lack of a successor was a testament to the North American contingency of the Fellowship and

the member's reverential attitude to Bawa that led to the inability to replace him. I soon realized once I was in Sri Lanka, that this was in fact the same situation within the Serendib Sufi Study Circle (SSSC). Others of course claim that no appointment was ever insinuated. According to the former claim though, there is a possibility that Bawa was indeed looking for a successor and actually could not find someone to continue his authority, especially since he had no hereditary member to pass his position to. Or did Bawa never intend for another "Chief Executive" as a means to distill a singular authority, and wanted to democratize leadership to preserve his diverse communities? The above motions to one of the most principal questions for the Fellowship: how will new executive members be appointed?

The process now has been through unanimous voting, as all issues are dealt with in the community. It is generally accepted that this particular issue of appointment will be a very critical decision and how this turns out will define the future directions of the Fellowship, one suggested possibility is the passing on of by current Executive Committee member's position to his or her own children. Many who are not formally part of the Executive Committee would disagree with this. This means certain families monopolize authority in defining the Fellowship, which will lead to the development of an exclusive group of administrative leaders based on hereditary ties. This also presents an issue as some young people born into the Fellowship have left because of the varying challenges in "doctrinal" interpretations of Bawa that they have not felt aligned to.

However, as is found often in religious studies the "official" discourse of an institution is not always reflected in the lived reality. It is for this reason that I presented the lived reality of these communities prior to exploring any formal definitions of what these communities are supposed to be. The dissonance between lived reality and official rhetoric are powerful signifiers

of the complexities of identity and community formation. I have been exploring these intricacies throughout my study by way of individual acts of pieties and rituals as they manifest in fluid spaces. Now, then, one is ideally situated to hear the voices of the members of the Fellowship and what they understand the Fellowship to be.

### **“What is the Fellowship to you?” - Capturing the Diversity of Voices**

#### *Beyond Structure: The Fellowship is a State of Being*

When I spoke with Jeanne Richarde, who has been a long time member of the Fellowship in Philadelphia, she expressed that

The Fellowship, he [Bawa] said, is in your heart and your hands. That’s what he said. Meaning that whatever becomes of the Fellowship will become whatever it becomes because of your own consciousness. Whatever you bring to the table, whatever you manifest here, for some people that manifestation takes a form and needs a building, it needs a mosque, it needs a place, it needs format, it needs a five-time prayer, it needs all of the things that some people need to bring them to a point where they can go beyond the form. But the form is essential for most people when they first start out as it was for me. I was looking for a format that would tell me that I was doing the right thing.<sup>440</sup>

In her understanding of what Bawa taught, the Fellowship was to be maintained in one’s “heart” and in one’s “hand” indicating to elements that define how one lives life, through love and service. She is also creating an important distinction from the latter metaphysical way of being

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<sup>440</sup> Interview with author, kitchen in the Bawa Muhaiyadeen Fellowship, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. April 8, 2014.

the Fellowship from the ritual practices of “five-time prayer” or the actual buildings that may constitute the Fellowship. She clarifies that though these are important aspects, and were even necessary for her, they are only the starting point and not the end unto themselves.

Rick Boardman, a senior member of the Fellowship who was heard from throughout the study, also captures a similar sentiment.<sup>441</sup> He relayed to me something of what he understood as Bawa’s teaching of the purpose of the Fellowship. Critical to his understanding of what Bawa taught was that it was a process that emphasized “consciousness”:

And what he told us about that is that basically how that works is that you empty yourself of yourself and that power will fill you and since that power is the one who keeps your breath flowing and makes your heart beat, there’s nothing unfamiliar or uncomfortable about it. So okay, in terms of the dynamics of this community and in terms of the entire process of trying to understand and write about anything really, but religion in particular, the thing that has become more and more and more clear to me over the course of this forty years I have been here is about consciousness and you know if God and man meet any place it’s, and if there is anything that characterizes the meeting place, it’s consciousness.<sup>442</sup>

Boardman, who has been with the Fellowship for nearly four decades, speaks of the meeting of the human being and God or “consciousness,” as the core focus of this community, as Bawa taught it to him. It is this meeting place that must be recognized if one is to comprehend the

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<sup>441</sup> See chapter 7 for more biographical detail on Rick Boardman.

<sup>442</sup> Interview with author, home of interviewee, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. April 14, 2014.

Fellowship. Both Richarde and Boardman speak of the Fellowship in esoteric realms of being (essence) and not necessarily in an institutional capacity that dwells in the realm of form.

*“A Fellowship of Truth”: A Community for Learning Wisdom*

Jeanne Hockenberry, an active senior student in the Fellowship, understands that the Fellowship has numerous purposes, one that is similar to those found within the by-laws of the Fellowship. First, it is a community. According to Hockenberry without a community the teachings of Bawa could not be contained:

Your question was why did he form the Fellowship? We needed a climate where we could meet and talk with each other. Sufis can't exist by themselves and he said from the beginning this is not about putting on the white sheet and disappearing in the Himalayas and sitting and meditating the rest of your life. He said I tried that and it didn't do any good. He said what you need is to balance your life, spiritually and in the world and do your duty; they're with these qualities and with this wisdom so everything you do is better. So you have to do it in your life, your present life, whatever God has given you. So you need the Fellowship to converse with each other, to meet with people who are like-minded and not going to take you astray in the world, to bolster your own understandings for that community. It's a community. And the other thing is eventually to house all of the tapes, to have a print shop to publishing facility. He didn't say this right out but you just knew the need and said no we have to find a Fellowship house. This is too small for us; too many people are coming to this little house. So he created the Fellowship for us to have fellowship in the truth, for us to have

a meeting place, for us to have a storage facility, for us to have printing facilities for his books.<sup>443</sup>

Notable in Hockenberry's comments are the very tangible roles that the Fellowship plays. Historically, the Fellowship house was purchased as a meeting space for those interested in listening and learning from Bawa. The former house was small for those who gathered so the Fellowship house was moved to its current site.<sup>444</sup> Now it is the place in which "like-minded" people gathered to "converse" and support each other, in their shared goal of seeking the "truth." The Fellowship was also meant to help navigate the "real world" which would otherwise distract one, but one also could not become a recluse who retreats to the top of the mountains. For Bawa, this was not the method he taught. In keeping with this particular approach to "truth" then a community was needed. So the Fellowship was a place that would offer "balance" and support one "spiritually" while one dwelt in the world that one needed to remain detached from. Hockenberry also refers to the very essential task that the Fellowship plays, a task that the Fellowship documents listed as part of the function of the institution. In the Fellowship, Bawa's discourse was to be archived, translated and published. The Fellowship grew into not only a meeting and gathering place, but also the storage space in which Bawa's discourses were archived, published and eventually printed for the members of the Fellowship and would be distributed to the general public.

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<sup>443</sup> Interview with author at their home, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. April 10, 2014.

<sup>444</sup> For details on the development of the Fellowship in Philadelphia, please see Chapter 2's *The Beginning of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship*.



As my conversation went on with Hockenberry she continued to express that the *masjid*, which forms part of the larger Fellowship complex, was built as a means to protect the Sufis, who have been persecuted historically.

Hockenberry: So anyway that's so he brought the mosque to protect the Sufis here. So if anybody asks me, oh you must be a Muslim you go over there? I say no. Well what are you? I'm searching for the truth; I just want to know what truth is, what's permanent and what's not permanent. I just want to [...] I'm a seeker, I'm looking, I'm studying. If I say, if I said to you I'm a Muslim, I separate you and me. If I say I'm a Christian I separate me from the rest. If I say I'm a Jew I separate me from [...] why would I want to pursue separation? You can't separate, you have to unify by saying we all don't really know a lot of things so we have to look. We have to search. We have to, for our life; we are here to do that. So if we don't use our life for what we have come here for then we are wasting our life, it has no meaning [...]. Even if the Fellowship is small, its better that it's small. He says I didn't come here with a big net to catch everything I could catch in the net. I came here with a special line, a little hook, to catch one at a time, one who's really interested one at a time. So don't ask how many people are here in this Fellowship and if you have heard Sonia Klein's answer, it was the best ever; did you hear what she said?

S: No.

Hockenberry: She was asked one day by visitors to the Fellowship how many people belong to this Fellowship and where it came to her, I don't know, but she said "on a good day only one." Isn't it beautiful?<sup>445</sup>

Hockenberry's comments highlight the negotiations that she takes part in, especially with the role of the *masjid* in the larger complex of the Fellowship. When individuals ask her about her religious identity, Hockenberry responds by asserting that it is not a religion that she is seeking, as it is a path of separation, rather she is seeking the path of unity. Still, the *masjid* that is part of the Fellowship complex has a purpose according to Hockenberry. Its purpose is to "protect the Sufis" whom she insinuates would otherwise be endangered without the banner of a religion, such as Islam, to safeguard it. In one member's comments alone, several layers of purpose and function are notable some that exists on the realm of the metaphysical and some that dwell in the realm of the practical.

Hanal Thambi met Bawa in Philadelphia in early 1972. Hanal Thambi's own early explorations were in Humanistic Psychology and the practices of "T Groups" or Training Groups popular in the 1960s and 1970s. It is while he was affiliated with this particular community that he began to hear about Sufi teachers. So he set out to find a Sufi teacher himself, which led to his discovery of Bawa. When I asked him about what the Fellowship is, he gave me an answer that shows the varying roles that it plays, similar to Hockenberry above. I have included the entire section of this portion of the response to the question because it showcases his thought process:

Hanal Thambi: What is the Fellowship?

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<sup>445</sup> Interview with author at their home, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. April 10, 2014.

S: What is the Fellowship?

Hanal Thambi: Okay yes. At, you know, at a minimum? It is the repository of his teachings.

S: Right.

Hanal Thambi: You know his, his over 10,000 hours, I mean, that's the number I hear thrown around.

S: Yeah.

Hanal Thambi: Of his recordings – both audio and video and we have an archive department and I think that's, that by itself I would say is the highest priority of what, you know, should be preserved.

S: Right.

Hanal Thambi: So that's one thing, preservation and a repository, a reservoir of his teachings.

S: Right.

Hanal Thambi: On a physical level, you know just the materials.<sup>446</sup>

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<sup>446</sup> Hanal Thambi requested that I use the name given to him by Bawa. Interview with author, in the garden of the

Like other members of the Fellowship Hanal Thambi states that one of the formative roles played by the Fellowship is “preservation” of Bawa’s teachings. He goes on to think of other roles of the Fellowship.

Hanal Thambi: So I think that’s, you know, that’s one thing. Then, then the other thing, I think also it’s, I wouldn’t call it like a sanctuary, but you know, in some ways, [...] and some levels it is. You know kind of a sanctuary where, but it’s also a place where, like this kind of goes back to the encounter group thing you know, you kind of begin when you’re moving along, you begin and especially when you’re around other people, who maybe at least on the surface seem to have the same goals you do.

[...continues]

You know, that only lasts for like a weekend.

[...continues]

This, if you’re involved with the Fellowship here, this can last a lifetime. So this is kind of like a, it’s like a longitudinal study of human lives with a certain intention over a whole lifetime and how they interact with each other.

[...continues]

So me here, I get to see how, what I go through, right? And how I see and I get to see “oh, this person, this person” you know I’m, they, look what’s happening in their lives and look at some of the things that they’re doing and some of the decisions and actions they’re taking even though they’re saying they’re on the path.

[...continues]

I mean, so you get to see how people's lives, it's easy to see other people's stuff.

[...continues]

Because, you know, you're not under their illusion.

[...continues]

But you know, you also have your own projection, which can also be an illusion of them. So there has to be some care there but you do get to see not only what's going on in your life as it develops but how other people allegedly, extensively are doing the same thing – play out their lives and what things affect them. So it's a study also of humanity by just being here. But humanity of people who said they're on the same path you're on but yet they may not really be on the same path you're on.<sup>447</sup>

In this portion of the comments, Hanal Thambi evokes the humanistic psychology that influenced him prior to his arrival to the Fellowship. He is referring to, in the language of psychology, the shared goals of members of the Fellowship as they tread the “path.” There is a sense for Hanal Thambi that the path is shared and common and it is not shared and common. The similarities and differences lie in both actions and beliefs, which could lead to what he understands as “projections” of the self upon the other and also a lack of shared “illusion” in the perception of the other and the self. It is these two tendencies, of human interaction and its role in the community of the Fellowship that leads him to assess the Fellowship as a site in which human beings gather in a “sanctuary.” Sometimes it becomes a process of “people watching” as one begins to “project” judgment upon other member's process of development, a projection that

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<sup>447</sup>Interview with author, in the garden of the Bawa Muhaiyadeen Fellowship, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. April 12, 2014.

speaks to the limitation of one's own shortcomings. Significantly though it is a life-long process but for some individuals it can just be a weekend affair (i.e., attending the meetings) but what takes place in terms of contending with the "ego" and being on the "path" extends beyond the weekend, it requires personal work. He continues,

Hanal Thambi: Okay so like you know one of the things, okay so that's also what I think is a powerful for me, a powerful thing of what the Fellowship is for me, also it's a place for new people to come and, like yourself, and plug in whatever way you want to plug in. So always [*sic*] stay open and free.

S: Right.

Hanal Thambi: And that's critical.

S: Right.

Hanal Thambi: And be open and free. And people come here as long as they're meeting normal human guidelines. You just can't come here and do anything you want.<sup>448</sup>

In his final comments of what the Fellowship is he presents what for him is the most "powerful" element of the Fellowship, that it remains an open venue. So those who are interested can come and "plug in" to what they need. Though in saying this, he does confirm that one cannot just

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<sup>448</sup> Interview with author, in the garden of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. April 12, 2014.

come and “do anything you want” in fact one must follow the “normal human guidelines” to access the space and its resources. The question of what constitutes “normal human guidelines” can be assessed in some respects back to the by-laws of the Fellowship. In this document it lists the “qualifications for membership”:

The membership of the Fellowship shall be open to all those who seek the Truth of God, without any considerations of race, color, religion, creed or philosophy. The Fellowship shall strive to be as one race and one family in the way of the One and to go in the Holy Presence of the One in a state of unity and fellowship (1973, 14).

Similar to Hanal Thambi, the by-laws state that it is open to all without any discrimination.

Musa Muhaiyaddeen is one of the current presidents of the Fellowship who comes from a Jewish background. He is a lawyer and an active leader in Sufi communities in the United States where he presents his teachings. His understanding of the Fellowship is that it contains many interpretations.

The Fellowship. One of the things that happens within institutions is that they are subject to the consciousness of the people in the institutions. So the Fellowship is what the people in it make it. And it's an institution. The ones that are sent by Allah are sent with resonance. The institutions that are formed after them are formed by men with intellect unless they're gifted with consciousness that allows resonance to enter it. So it depends on the people.<sup>449</sup>

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<sup>449</sup> Interview with author at the home of the interviewee, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. January 5, 2014.

Here, again, one can see the difference between the “form” or essence as it was sent “by Allah” “with resonance” as it manifested in Bawa and the attempts of the institutionalization of that form as a result of the people who were affected by that initial “resonance” (i.e., Bawa). I tried to gather what he personally felt the Fellowship was and he expressed the following:

Musa Muhaiyaddeen: It has a lot of faces. And I think if you ask most people, they would give you their own interpretations. There are those who don't want to do five times prayer, so for them it is not Islamic. There are those who believe that five times prayer is integral to the understanding of Sufism and the kind of devotion that is required in Islam is the kind of devotion that is required in order to attain purity. So you are going to get a lot of different answers. And I don't think there is a static answer.

[...continues]

There might, there might be an institutional answer that you could vote on [laughing] and then get a majority vote answer, as an answer but that is something like the ecumenical council of 700 when they declared that Jesus was divine, what does that mean?! I mean now how many Christian sects do you have?

[...continues]

So as many Christian sects as you can have that's how many different ways you can interpret what the Fellowship is about. And unless its conclusion is that it is about understanding the relationship between man and God in the purest form then everything else is surplusage.

Musa Muhaiyaddeen presents various ways in which individual members interpret the Fellowship. But he also shows that though a formal vote could take place, and his laughter



gestures such votes have taken place, that it is not the goal of the Fellowship because such formal declarations of the Fellowship would only result in further divisions, comparable to theological sectarianism that led to vast Christian denominations. What Musa Muhaiyaddeen does affirm in his comments above is that at its “purest form” the Fellowship attempts to foster an “understanding of the relationship between man and God.” A statement that closely resembles what is found in the article that refers to the “Internal Objective” of the Fellowship constitution.

So far, then, Jeanne Richarde and Rick Boardman speak specifically of the Fellowship as a metaphysical state, which aims to access a “consciousness” while for Jeanne Hockenberry and Hanal Thambi they highlighted that it is a place of shared community in which members aim to balance their lives spiritually and practically. The Fellowship also serves as an archival space along with publishing and printing Bawa’s discourses. Hanal Thambi added that it was meant to be free and open to all who want to access the Fellowship, as long as they follow “normal human guidelines.” These views then are confirmed with those of Musa Muhaiyaddeen who affirms that the Fellowship remains many things to many people, but at its core it is concerned with the relationship between the human being and God. Yet these broadly stated approaches to the Fellowship only begin to outline some of the noted overarching themes. Another understanding of the Fellowship lies in what has been a polarizing understanding, its relationship with Islam. But even this relationship is differently interpreted.

#### *“The Medina Principle”: Sufism, Islam and the Fellowship*

When Bawa evoked Arabic and relayed stories of the Prophet Muhammad in his discourses, some members of the audience began to draw connections between what Bawa was teaching to Islam and Sufism. The exact nature of the relationship between Sufism and Islam becomes

varied depending on whom one speaks to. This was not a tendency unique to Philadelphia, but in fact commenced in Sri Lanka.<sup>450</sup> Many of course began to interpret that what Bawa taught was essentially Islam and Sufism, which he distilled for his American audience. One individual who plays a seminal role in presenting the latter particular interpretation of Bawa is imam Miller.<sup>451</sup> The imam serves in varying capacities in the Fellowship and in the broader religious communities of Philadelphia through his inter-faith activities and Muslim chaplaincy roles. He is one of the senior students. He was acting as the treasurer for the Fellowship when he was appointed by Bawa to be the imam with Ahamed Kabir, the Sri Lankan imam for the newly constructed *masjid*. Imam Miller gives his *khutbah* (sermon) in English, with the use of Arabic, attracting many young Muslims from the university nearby. He meets groups that regularly visit the Fellowship and presents notions of what Islam is and often times speaks as a representative of the broader Fellowship in public and community spaces. In short imam Miller plays a noteworthy role in the presentation of the Fellowship to a particularly Muslim contingency and of the Fellowship community in varying official capacities.

In our interview wherein we discussed Bawa, his relationship with Bawa and the Fellowship, I asked imam Miller if one could be a Sufi without being a Muslim he responded, “No, I would say not. But perhaps to reach the highest stage of Sufism you would have to be a Muslim. Now I’m basing that not on what Bawa said but Abdul Qadir Jilani, who was the *Qutb*

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<sup>450</sup> For the development of the Serendib Sufi Study Circle please see Chapter 5’s subsection Bawa’s Life at the *Ashram* and Mankumban.

<sup>451</sup> For more on imam Miller and his role in the development of the Fellowship, especially the *masjid* please see Chapter 2’s subsections *The Beginning of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship* and *Negotiating Sacred Spaces and Practices*.

[...] was the highest saint.”<sup>452</sup> Here he uniquely distinguishes his own teachings from what Bawa relayed. He goes on to explain that this was indeed what was expected of him from Bawa:

That’s the whole thing, another thing Bawa didn’t want me to just use the same words as him because everything has to be based on Qur’an and Sunnah. So what you do is you take that and then you explain them in the same way Bawa did. Almost everything Bawa did was from the Qur’an and Sunnah but he didn’t say it was from that. He’d take a point and he would explain that but once you become familiar with it you say oh that’s what he was explaining, that was he was saying.<sup>453</sup>

So this does not mean that what imam Miller presents, such as through his sermons, are different from what Bawa taught. In fact, according to imam Miller, what Bawa taught was “from the Qur’an and Sunnah, but he didn’t say it was from that.” Bawa’s discourses, then for imam Miller, were interpretations of Islam given so that a wider audience could access it. Imam Miller went on to express what he understood of the relationship of the Fellowship to Sufism and Islam:

Imam Miller: [...] I call it the Medina principle. In Medina everyone was there. There were Christians, there were Jews, there were pagans, there were, you know, idol worshipers and so on. So they all came to listen to the *rasul*, there was a restriction. If they wanted to follow him that was fine, if not they did what they did and they have a pact for mutual defense of the city. And that’s sort of the way it is here. I mean, the main thing is in building the community you can’t reject anyone. So everyone’s welcome, come, come, come, come. That’s what

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<sup>452</sup> Interview with author, Arabic classroom of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, April 16, 2014.

<sup>453</sup> Interview with author, Arabic classroom of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, April 16, 2014.

Bawa's discourse said. Don't exclude anyone. But then people naturally started excluding themselves. He said at one time over 100 000 people have come and left because they couldn't accept what I was saying.

[...continues]

So there's a natural selection process. The same thing that happened with the mosque here, there is a selection, the people that come to this mosque are selected because the hot heads come and their feed isn't there, you know [laughing] that was boring. They didn't talk about *jihad* and that sort of thing but not that I don't touch on those subjects but they are explained in the sense of classical Islam, which is basically not far from Sufism. And in Islam it's called the *tazkirah* of purification [purification of the heart]. The idea that there's a society of people that are Sufis without the concept of purification is a very misguided concept. So really Sufis are more restrictive in their behaviour than regular Muslims.<sup>454</sup>

Imam Miller uses the parallel of the authority and leadership of the Prophet Muhammad during his tenure in Medina, where the Prophet migrated (*hijra*) with his new young community, to draw comparison to the dynamics unfolding within the Fellowship. During this seminal moment in the new spiritual and political leadership of the Prophet Muhammad, imam Miller notes that the Prophet Muhammad welcomed everyone- the Christians, the Jews, the Pagans and even idol worshippers. If they choose not to accept the message of the Prophet Muhammad, they still remained under his protection. Similarly exclusion is not the mandate of the Fellowship. As imam Miller understands it, the individuals excluded themselves, such as during construction of the *masjid*, and as they may continue to do so now. He uses this particular practice of self-

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<sup>454</sup> Interview with author, Arabic classroom of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. April 16, 2014.

exclusion as a means to suggest that one cannot discount the practice of Islam because one claims to be a Sufi. For imam Miller the path of Sufism requires far more rigor in acts of purity, even more so than being a Muslim. Therefore, the practice of the purity of Islam is a prerequisite to the practice of Sufism.

Imam Miller maintains this balance. His *khutbahs* (sermons) attract many from the Muslim community in Philadelphia. He weaves both Qur'anic commentaries with Sufi interpretations, usually gleaned from the interpretations of Abdul Qadir Jilani and Bawa. "He recites Qur'an beautifully" would exclaim many Muslims who come to the *masjid* when I asked why they attended this mosque and not another, citing imam Miller's sermons along with the overall atmosphere of the Fellowship community as the reason. His popularity is also granted by being an American convert to Islam and the head imam of a known Sufi mosque in Philadelphia. The institutionalization of the *masjid* was not without its challenges in the early years, as Simmons explained:

It's kind of interesting how you know [...] you probably have heard that for the longest [...] the Muslim Association there in Delaware, what do they call themselves? I don't know if they still even exist, but it was like an association of mosque [...] that were from Philadelphia, Delaware, and South Jersey and they would not let the Fellowship join, because they said we weren't real Muslims, that we were worshipping a man, Bawa. You know so, for the longest we were not accepted. But that's all changed, and of course the imam [Miller] from the Fellowship is an active part of [...] associations of Muslim, imams and all that there are.<sup>455</sup>

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<sup>455</sup> Interview with author, via Skype, May 16, 2014.

Imam Miller has worked not only to develop but also maintain the standards of the *masjid* of the Fellowship within the greater Sunni Muslim community in Philadelphia. He has also played an active role in the community through inter-faith activities, such as with the Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia, a group that imam Miller is a founding member and on the board of directors. He has served as a Muslim chaplain, worked as a police chaplain with the Philadelphia police department and is still member of the Fellowship's Board of Trustees. When schools visit the Fellowship, imam Miller is usually present to speak with students in the Fellowship classroom or in Bawa's room. Imam Miller is sometimes dressed in his regalia white robe with Arab style headdress covering, other times in a pant and suit, with a *kufi*. Because of his immensely tall presence, his meditated strides and his long white beard, which includes a walking staff during *khutbah*, some young Muslim Fellowship members enthusiastically have nicknamed him "Gandalf the White."

Imam Miller's leadership straddles a line, negotiating the varying contingencies of the Fellowship. Those who hold administrative positions may only have to contend with the Fellowship in its universal mandate of truth and wisdom, imam Miller must not only maintain this perennial understanding of Bawa's traditions when he leads the Fellowship discourse meetings, but also uphold his public position as an imam of a *masjid* that is open to all Muslims. Imam Miller acts as a spiritual counselor to many members of the *masjid* who attend from varying backgrounds- university students, recent immigrants, African-Americans and new converts. He must be an exemplar of a follower of the Prophet Muhammad and a keeper of the Sunnah and *shari'a* of Islam. This was the leadership position he was appointed to by Bawa. His fulfillment of the obligations of the imam of the *masjid* of Bawa has solidified his leadership amongst the Muslims in the Fellowship and beyond. It has at the same time marginalized him

and his practice of Islam from those within the Fellowship who do not see the teachings of Bawa solely confined to Islam and its practices as imam Miller represents them. Still, it is his devotion to Bawa that informs his need to fulfill this position, a devotion shared by all those depicted thus far.

Imam Miller's association of the Fellowship with Islamic protocol, one that is necessary to being a Sufi, stands as one approach to Bawa's teachings. At its opposite end remain many members of the Fellowship, who sat with imam Miller in front of Bawa as he taught and understood that to truly emulate Bawa's teachings, one must fully transcend all religious protocols, even Islamic ones. What some of these members heard was a universal language, as Bawa's teachings and the connections to Abrahamic traditions, Hinduism and Zoroastrianism was the norm. These various associations with the religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Hinduism were seen as venues to the study "wisdom."

*"The Language of Bawa": the Universalism of the Fellowship*

In one of the earliest academic studies of the Fellowship and Bawa, Webb placed Bawa in line with early Sufis such as "[...] Bistami, al-Hallaj, and Ibn 'Arabi" because of Bawa's "language of 'merging' and 'unity' with God" (1994, 83). Placing Bawa on par with these classical Sufi figures compresses their differences in their personage and leanings, but Webb's emphasis on Bawa's style of language does highlight a particular interpretational trajectory adopted by many members of the Fellowship. One of the Toronto executive members and senior students of Bawa is Nur Sharon Marcus.<sup>456</sup> When I asked Nur Sharon Marcus what she understood the Fellowship to be she expressed the following:

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<sup>456</sup> For more biographic details on Nur Sharon Marcus please see Chapter 7 section on the discussion of the *Qutb*.

I look upon the Fellowship as a house with four doors opened in four directions. [...]here is a door open to Hinduism, a door open to Zoroastrianism, a door open to Christianity and a door open to the Judaic-Arabic Islamic tradition because Bawa looked at Judaism and Islam as younger brother and older brother as one tradition. So I think of the Fellowship as a place where we all come together, because Sufism is the path we have to carve for ourselves at the end of the path that we take at the end of the road, which the religion will open for us. Now we have in our Fellowship, right here in Toronto, we have people who go to mass, the Catholic tradition and yet during Ramadan will, which is the only time we pray together here in Toronto, except for the Friday night *dhikr*. It is the only time we *salat* together and they have lined up with us to do those prayers, without batting an eye without any problem and I think this is so cool, this is what the Fellowship is. When I, I have, after Bawa was no longer physically among us, this is early in the 90s, I went with a couple of other people to a Sufi community which had its roots in Hinduism and I walked around the sacrificial fire with them because that was that was their ritual prayer. I am happy to do that. There is somebody from the Islamic background from Iran, who told me he likes to go sit in a church and pray and I love that. I think that is so, I think that is wonderful. We have people from all the different traditions. In Philly, there are people who still identify themselves with the Zen Buddhist tradition; they talk in terms to people who are immersed in Zen Buddhism. I think of the traditions of the Fellowship as being the highest explanation of the path within the path that we can articulate, and the language, which comes to my heart, is the language, which I've learned from Bawa Muhaiyaddeen.<sup>457</sup>

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<sup>457</sup> Interview with author, home of interviewee, Toronto, Canada. October 10, 2013.



Nur Sharon Marcus captures the complementarity of the diversity of the Fellowship. Her use specifically of the metaphor of “doors opened to the four directions”, as found in the architecture *mazar* of Bawa in Pennsylvania, and her correlation of it to the religious traditions of Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Judaism/Islam captures for her the path that leads to the realm beyond form. Her mention of the presence of various religious and spiritual practitioners of Zen Buddhism and Catholicism, who fully participate in the Fellowship rituals, such as *salat*, without hesitation forms the basis of what the Fellowship is. For Nur Sharon Marcus Sufism begins where religion ends. Religions are not limitations, but rather the foundations that lead to the practice of Sufism. The one practice that she does mention is *dhikr*, that take place at the Toronto Branch regularly. She does not necessarily understand these traditions as religiously bound. She continues to explain this

And I keep saying to people here, I didn’t have the occasion to say this in Philly, you know if you want to live in the kingdom of God then you have to learn the language. You have to know, you have to know what to say in the kingdom of God and for me the language of the kingdom of God is the language of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen so that’s why I talk in terms of *shariat* [law], *tariqat* [path], *haqiqat* [truth] and *marifat* [gnosis]<sup>458</sup> because these are the words that Bawa used. So you have to know the meaning of the nine Muhammads, you have to know *la ilaha illallah* [there is no god but God] you have to know the *subhanallah kalima* [Glory be to God word/recitation] because that is the ultimate prayer of purification of the heart, which he told us to do. So there are things that I do that are definitely connected to the Islamic tradition than the Judaic tradition or the Christian tradition because of the language it

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<sup>458</sup> I give literal translations of these words, not necessarily what Nur Sharon Marcus would interpret them, which would be from Bawa’s own discourses.

comes in. But it doesn't mean that the others are not. They might be using different words but they are doing the same prayers in the same way. And I feel that the Fellowship is [...] the Fellowship is the ultimate dish in which everything is served. I figure that Bawa Muhaiyaddeen spread a feast of truth and wisdom and said help yourself, take what you need, take all of it if you can, if you can't take all of it, take what you feel is appropriate for your hunger, your appetite, your longing. I am very greedy I want to gobble the whole thing [laughing].<sup>459</sup>

Nur Sharon Marcus implores the use of Arabic words and phrases that have a particular tradition within Islam, that were disseminated by Bawa.<sup>460</sup> She utilizes these words because Bawa employed these terms himself in his teachings, especially of particular prayers (i.e., *salawat*, *dhikr*). Their relationships with these words are relationships with Bawa and not necessarily Arabic and/or Islam. This language is not the only way to access the truth that Bawa presented, but it was the truth that resonated with the disciples of Bawa because of their relationship with their teacher. One can also see this in how disciples, such as Nur Sharon Marcus, interpret words such as *islam*:

When I first sat at Bawa's feet the things [that] were more most extraordinary, most revelatory to me were about Islam, because I knew nothing. So every time, you know, I just vaguely thought that Muhammad was one of those prophets that I knew nothing about, you know same as all the other names in the Old Testament, which didn't resonate very much.

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<sup>459</sup> Interview with author, home of interviewee, Toronto, Canada. October 10, 2013.

<sup>460</sup> This was discussed in Chapter 7, especially Bawa's teachings on the "nine Muhammads." Please see Chapter 7's subsection *From Swami to Qutb: the Many Names of Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen*.

But Bawa talked about Islam not as not as the religion, which is practiced in some parts of the world and not in other parts of the world. He talked about Islam as the surrender to light, he says he gives more than one interpretation to the word islam but he says the two syllables to the word islam *ishq* is desire, *lam* is light. So islam is the surrender of desire to light. I love that explanation it has the purity and resonance that he offers us all the time. But its that *ishq* [that] is also translated sometimes to mean divine love so its the conjunction of that divine love with his divine light.<sup>461</sup>

It is the language of Bawa then that forms the foundational basis of the use of terminology related to Sufism and Islam, this language is spiritual (i.e., *dhikr* or prayer of remembrance in Arabic). Bawa spoke in Tamil. Some of his *duas* (intercessory prayers) and devotional songs were in Tamil and Arabic. But he did not teach prayers in Tamil. He taught prayers in Arabic. So Nur Sharon Marcus' idea of the "language of Bawa" can be understood in literal sense that is how he employed Arabic in meditative practices. From Nur Sharon Marcus' understanding of Sufism and Islam to imam Miller's interpretation of Sufism and Islam, the differing interpretative tendencies in the Fellowship are evident. However, both of these senior disciples of Bawa claim that it is the teachings of Bawa that they personally encountered that forms the basis of their explanations.

One might credit the contextualization of Bawa's teaching as a form of universal Sufism due to the specific demographic of seekers who formed the early members of the Fellowship, who were mainly American and Canadian. What I found, however, is that some members who joined the Fellowship after the physical passing of Bawa and who came from Muslim countries,

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<sup>461</sup> Interview with author, Toronto, Canada, October 13, 2013.

such as Iran and South Asia, shared similar sentiments of Sufism as beyond Islam. For instance, Farokh, an Executive Member of the Fellowship Branch in Toronto, Canada, is one example of a member who expressed this to me when I asked him what his religious identity was in relation to the Fellowship.

None, no religious identity [laughing]. I have none, I was born Muslim, raised as a Muslim, but I got to a point that I realized that *muslim*, that *islam* is a verb, is a word in order to become or to be a *islam*, a *muslim*, I have to get into the state of *islam*, which has nothing to do with the religion. So I have long left that behind. I do my prayers, you know I face the *qiblah*, I love the Qur'an because it teaches you a lot. There is a lot that I don't understand from that book, but I respect Islam as the way I respect any other religion and I believe that if you really want to go home, you have started a journey, but there is a destination. And if you really want to get there you have to be prepared to leave titles, names, [and] labels behind you.<sup>462</sup>

Many felt similarly as Farokh who remarks that in this path, one must be ready to avoid labels in their relationship to the Fellowship and Bawa. For Farokh, *islam* is understood as a state of being, not one that is related to a creedal religion. Even though he completes his prayers and faces “the *qiblah*” this does not give him the identity of being a “Muslim” but rather requires that he transcend that identity to seek beyond and aim for the path of returning “home.”

The language of Bawa as a language of non-conformity and formlessness in the search for the one ultimate truth is an accepted reality amongst many members of the Fellowship. Some

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<sup>462</sup> Interview with author, Starbucks, Toronto, Canada. November 18, 2013.

members interacted with Bawa personally and so attest to have learned this language personally from this relationship, as relayed by Nur Sharon Marcus. Others, such as Farokh, who have spiritually experienced Bawa through his discourses understand the same, and do not necessarily believe that it is the language of Islam or Arabic that is important, but the truth as beyond any religious identity that is critical. I have laid out some potential interpretations of what the Fellowship is, and these are just some of the many possibilities that can be illustrated, these interpretations can be further expanded and other categories filled it. As Musa Muhaiyadeen states, every member that one asks in the Fellowship what the Fellowship is, will give you a different response. And capturing every single possible response is naturally beyond one study, but when taken as a whole that is inclusive of acts of pieties noted in Sections I and II, along with some of the voices represented above, one has a map that highlights the diversity and pluralism of the Fellowship, is the same tendencies evident in the Sri Lankan context?

### **Using the Serendib Sufi Study Circle to Understand the Future of the Fellowship**

The Serendib Sufi Study Circle submitted the by-laws to the Sri Lankan government for the formal incorporation of the Circle as an organization, which was signed on November 27, 1974.<sup>463</sup> In this document, it indicates the objective of the incorporation in clause 3. It consists of the promotion and study and understanding of Sufism (mysticism) among all persons seeking knowledge of Sufism (mysticism), including the teaching of the principles and practices of Sufism (mysticism) as expounded by His Holiness Sheikh Muhammad Muhiyadeen Guru Bawa during his lifetime;

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<sup>463</sup> Please see Chapter 5 for the development of the Serendib Sufi Study Circle, in subsection *Bawa's Life at the Ashram* and Mankumban.

B. the compilation, translation, publication and dissemination of the principles and practices of Sufism (mysticism) as are or may be expounded by His Holiness Sheikh Muhammad Muhiyadeen Guru Bawa and the research works, reports and material pertaining to Sufism (mysticism) as are or may be forthcoming from the scholarship of any member for the public good;

C. the establishment and maintenance of voluntary charitable organizations for any one or more of the following purposes:

(i) the relief of poverty,

(ii) the care of widows and orphans, the aged and the destitute, by establishment of homes, orphanages, dispensaries, medical care, and

(iii) the relief of hunger, disease and sickness by the provision of sustenance and nourishment and medical care to the needy, the orphans, the indigent and the sick;

Between the Fellowship document explored in earlier sections of this chapter and this particular document one finds several similarities but also some poignant differences. Both organizations emphasize the dissemination of the teachings of Bawa as its critical function and purpose. The Fellowship categorizes these teachings as related to “wisdom” but the Circle aligns Bawa’s teachings specifically with Sufism (as mysticism). The goals of disseminating Bawa’s teachings are shared by both organizations. The ways in which these teachings are labeled differ in semantics, especially as they evoke a spectrum of traditions (from perennial wisdom to specific Sufism). There is also a shared sense that future publications should also stress the centrality of Bawa’s teachings. Furthermore, there is a call to serve beyond the Fellowship and the Circle, be it by helping those in need (i.e., orphans or the sick), which the Fellowship extends to all

“Human Beings” with “Love and Compassion.” Bawa, his teachings, the publications of Bawa’s teachings and service to the less fortunate remain the primary emphases in both documents in Colombo and Philadelphia, the respective headquarters in both localities.

In terms of the management of the Circle, it maintains the same level of authority to Bawa and direction in terms of management. In Section 4, the following is stated with regards to “Committee of Management.”

1. The affairs of the Corporation shall, subject to the rules in the force for the time being of the Corporation, be administered-

A. during the lifetime of His Holiness Sheikh Muhammad Muhiyadeen Guru Bawa, by a Committee of Management nominated by Him and elected by the members; and

B. after the lifetime of His Holiness Sheikh Muhammad Muhiyadeen Guru Bawa, by a Committee of Management to be elected by the members,

2. The Patron, His Holiness Sheikh Muhammad Muhiyadeen Guru Bawa, shall have the right during his lifetime to remove from office, on the recommendation of the Committee of Management, any member of the Committee of Management and nominate any other person to fill the vacant post (1974, XV/318).

Similar to the Fellowship by-laws, property and land titles are within the authority of the Board of Trustees, while a “special general meeting” can be called and votes cast “of at least two-thirds of the members present and voting such meeting to make such rules as are not inconsistent with the principles and provisions of this Law” (6.1). Not seen in this document are any references to

particular titles of presidents, secretaries and treasurers as evident in the Fellowship by-laws. In the Circle's by-laws provision is already in place for "after the lifetime" of Bawa when committees are to be elected by members. Where the Philadelphia by-laws gave specific instructions to the branches, which also have voting rights, such is not the case in Sri Lanka. It appears that power is maintained specifically in Colombo, without mention of Jaffna or other centers such as Matale.

The diversity of spaces and interpretations of who Bawa is found in North America is also evident in Sri Lanka. Now one of the immediate differences recognized in Sri Lanka is that though Bawa's ministries began in Jaffna in his *ashram* and solidified in the construction of the building of Mankumban on Velanai Island, the reputed headquarters of the Serendib Sufi Study Circle is Colombo at the home of one of the disciple's of Bawa.<sup>464</sup> Just as in North America, there is a network of Sri Lankan sites, that include branches (such as in Matale or Puliyanikulam) and others are sacred centers (such as in Jaffna and Velanai). Where the activity remains central in Philadelphia, the headquarters of the North American community, the same is not the case in Sri Lanka. Colombo, though legally the headquarters, does not function and attract the same attention as the headquarters in Philadelphia.

Muslim disciples of Bawa in Colombo mobilized to officially incorporate the Serendib Sufi Study Circle as an organization, prior to which Bawa's ministries were maintained at his *ashram* in Jaffna, while early constructions began of Mankumban. The trajectory of institutionalizations of Bawa's spaces in Sri Lanka itself differs from North America. For instance Mankumban (*masjid-mazar*) would be one of the first spaces to be built in Sri Lanka by American and Tamil disciples. The *masjid* would be the last formal project of Bawa in

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<sup>464</sup> Please see Chapter 5 and 6 for the development of the Sri Lankan sites of Bawa's communities.



Philadelphia, while of course the *mazar* developed posthumously with Bawa's physical passing and as such cannot be claimed to be developed by Bawa. However, weekly meetings take place in Colombo and one room is maintained as a shrine to Bawa at this location, while it is also readily used for the president or secretary. There is a monthly *dhikr* where food rations and financial assistance are given to those who come especially from the Puttalam camps, the site where many Muslims who were expelled by the Tamil Tigers in 1990 settled. The Colombo Branch, which is the center of the SSSC, maintains financial, legal and administrative capital. As such the leaders of the Colombo Branch manage the overall movement in Sri Lanka and maintain gatherings. Still it does not have the sacred capital that Mankumban and the *ashram* have in Jaffna.

In the by-laws there is a very real affinity to Sufism present. The label Sufi is found in the name of this particular movement, whereas in America, Bawa invoked "fellowship" and not "Sufi" as the name of his community. This is a rather critical nuance to recognize. Thus where Sufi is implored in Sri Lanka, the challenge arises for its communities with the northern sites precisely because those in Jaffna are predominately Tamil Hindus. Part of the reason for this is of course because of the expulsion of the Muslims from the north. The tendency is for pilgrims either from Colombo itself, or from abroad (Saudi Arabia, England and the United States) to visit these sacred sites in the north.<sup>465</sup> Colombo is a minor node in many regards, whereas the *ashram* and Mankumban are central in the blessings, or *baraka*, they emit and as such the activity these sites attract.

In the *ashram* and Mankumban there are dual purposes to the spaces. An imam was appointed by Colombo officially as a response to maintain Bawa's *masjid* as a *masjid* and not as

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<sup>465</sup> The flow of pilgrims to Mankumban and the *ashram* was discussed in Chapter 6's subsection *Pilgrimages to Bawa's Spaces in Sri Lanka by Members of the Fellowship*.

a temple per se. I highlighted neither the matron at the *ashram* nor most of the devotees who regularly perform personal acts of piety participate in *salat*.<sup>466</sup> The sporadic visits from devotees from North America and beyond affirm Bawa's authority, but it does not necessarily impact the *ashram* and Mankumban on a daily basis where tensions between varying personalities vying for spatial leadership unfold and the "proper" or "orthodox" maintenance of Bawa's spaces. In Philadelphia this dynamic of the mobilization of administrative leadership and no singular leadership claim to Bawa's space is not seen. The difficulty in Jaffna is one of land deeds to the properties of Bawa, even though the Serendib Sufi Study Circle (SSSC) legally owns these properties. These sacred spaces are also sites of income and revenue for those who help maintain it. This is not to say that individuals take the money for personal use but such possibilities do emerge. Many devotees donate to the *ashram* by leaving money under Bawa's pillow, which then is used by the matron to purchase food for weekly *jum'ah* meals. International pilgrims visit the *ashram* and Mankumban and also donate money to Tamils who happen to be at the *ashram* or Mankumban at the time they visit, as they feel that they are servants of the space or feel that they are donating to the less fortunate. This signals to a class divide between Colombo and Jaffna. This often manifests in perceptions of the Hindus being ritually oriented and at times superstitious, while those from Colombo find more affinity to the discourses of Bawa (sometimes understood as "intellectual"). The recent refurbishment of the farm of Bawa in Puliyanikulam was completed with the efforts of Bawa's senior students from the Jaffna. These personal efforts further challenge the authority that should be maintained in Colombo. But what results is that more and more Hindus are drawn to Bawa as their guru and so become part of the community, or even participate in activities that range from the *mawlid*s to Ramadan for

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<sup>466</sup> Please see Chapter 5 and 6's subsection on ritual practices and pieties at the *ashram* and Mankumban.

blessings (*baraka* or *darshan*) and food. Future leaders of these spaces will ultimately influence the representation of Bawa's sites, either in an Islamic or Hindu ethos.

One site that defies this particular trend is Matale in central Kandy, which is maintained by one family. This site has attracted a large Muslim population due to its location and has created its own lineage within the networks based on the eldest sibling, Customs Rahaman Thambi, who was one of the early disciples of Bawa. With his death, Rahaman's siblings now maintain the jungle shrine to Bawa and complete *mawlid*s. Many Sri Lankan Muslims and some Malay Muslims form part of the community who utilize this space. Like the other locations, they also maintain Bawa's room as a shrine. This particular branch of the Circle, because of its distance from Jaffna and Colombo, also remains independent and has developed as such, even though it is still part of the Serendib Sufi Study Circle officially.

Where Colombo is administratively the headquarters, the regular centers of activities are most certainly in Jaffna. Therefore those who remain at the *ashram* and Mankumban will be individuals who have authority in determining the future of the Circle in its unofficial reality apart from the officially mandated one. It is because the continuity of rituals lies within the custodians of these sacred spaces and most visitors are attending the *ashram* and Mankumban because of Bawa's promixity to these spaces, not Colombo. As it stands now, it is the Hindu devotees who do so. This will be important for the Fellowship in North America as a potential reality. Branches in North America already maintain independence but also look to Philadelphia for direction. Yet, future developments or even factions may result that means that branches maintain separate ties. I found out during my fieldwork that branches were forming in Karachi, Pakistan and even in parts of India. The Fellowship Headquarters may not necessarily maintain strong ties with all the developing branches. The proliferation of the networks of Bawa's

communities may mean the lessening of immediate relations with Philadelphia and more localized devotion to Bawa. Moreover, as noted in Sri Lanka, the sacred spaces, such as the tombs, will remain central and may develop new networks and meanings for new communities, highlighting the consistent transformative nature of Sufism through spaces, rituals and collective imagination.

Initially, it appeared that Philadelphia was riddled with unique leadership issues. The initial exposure to Bawa's communities in Sri Lanka, however, presents similar challenges. In Sri Lanka this relates specifically to space (i.e., *ashram* and Mankumban) but in Philadelphia authority lies with administrative positions in the Executive Committee. In both of these types of authorities interpretational approaches to what these leaders are leading (institutionally) remains a difference of opinion but the reason behind the differences of approaches remains far more similar than it appears. Devotion to the ultimate authority of Bawa is continuous throughout all of Bawa's communities, from the matron in the *ashram* to the imam at Mankumban to the senior president in Philadelphia to the imam in the *masjid*. This devotion and faith in Bawa manifests locally and is individually distinctive, for example for Hindus in Jaffna, this may mean the performance of rituals with incense at his bed. For the imam in Mankumban, his faith and relationship to Bawa is in the keeping of Islamic *adab*, such as *salat*, a sentiment that is shared by imam Miller. But unlike the imam at Mankumban who does not deliver *khutbah* (because he does not have the audience to do so) imam Miller does have an authoritative presence among Muslims who attend the *masjid* in Philadelphia. Imam Miller appears to contain more authority in relation to other fellow senior students of Bawa, and so it leads to uneasiness of his authority in the Fellowship. For others, such as Nur Sharon Marcus or Farokh, religion is not the emphasis of the Fellowship but rather Sufism. Sufism is the path one arrives upon once religion, even

Islam, is transcended. The challenges then experienced by the members of the Fellowship in North America, are similar to challenges experienced by the Sri Lankan network of the Circle, in which authority and institutional developments result in moments of dissonance in which schisms ensue. When this much diversity is contained within the Fellowship and the Circle, it becomes evident why it is challenging to maintain unity between Hindus, Muslims, Sufis, Zen Buddhists and Catholics (just to name a few). Spaces are significant in the future of both of these communities. I have mapped groups who are utilizing these spaces and the leadership that is associated with these spaces. So who are some of the individuals who will likely step into them (i.e., spaces or authority) especially in Philadelphia?

### **Negotiating Future Visions of the Fellowship**

What is central to understanding what is unfolding at the Fellowship is that Bawa emphasized and tailored different aspects of his teachings to his varying students, depending on what they needed. This is captured in the comments that Hanal Thambi made to me during our conversation:

Hanal Thambi: So you know, Bawa like, I think that caused a lot of confusion you know with people because of how he customized, when he gave a discourse downstairs or something and he gave a general formal discourse, that's all that's true for everybody.

[continues...]

But how he dealt individually with people and whatever he may have said to them it could be ninety-nine percent true for everybody, but maybe one percent may only apply to that person.

[continues...]

So there could be confusion and if you start comparing yourself to what he said to him or her or stuff, you know, comparing yourself to other people is, is not a human trait because that's the intellect.<sup>467</sup>

Hanal Thambi explains that Bawa spoke to and taught individuals differently. When he addressed a general audience, his teachings were catered to the wider public. When he spoke to individuals privately and proscribed certain practices, it was likely meant for them alone. It is these different instructions that resulted in the development of distinctive practices amongst members of the Fellowship. This is evident on a boarder scale as well when one looks at the trajectory of how the Fellowship and the Circle have developed. In their own way, both the Sri Lankan and North American communities are struggling to maintain the ministries of Bawa without his physical presence. These locales are attempting to fill the gap left by Bawa, but the diversity of members he attracted be it religiously, ethnically and economically and how he instructed them have meant the maintenance of these diversities without a living charismatic personality presents an immense challenge. The future of the Fellowship, therefore, rests with those who may fill the current administrative positions.

#### *From the Young People to New Members*

There are young children who have been born into the Fellowship in Philadelphia who potentially can step into these leadership roles.<sup>468</sup> The spectrum of relationships of the first wave of children born into the Fellowship varies immensely, however. These blocks of individuals are

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<sup>467</sup> Interview with author, in the garden of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. April 12, 2014.

<sup>468</sup> Benjamin H. Snyder's masters' thesis *Heartspace: The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship and the Culture of Unity* (2003) explores some of these inter-generational issues. Please see his study for more.

the children born to the first disciples of Bawa and they require a full in-depth study unto themselves, which is beyond the scope of this current study. Some have left the community altogether. Others may have moved elsewhere for school and work, and so maintain private connections and visit the Fellowship when they are in town. Some have married partners who are outside the tradition, while others have married partners who are Muslim and maintain close ties to the Fellowship and have raised their own children (now the second wave of children, grandchildren to senior students of Bawa) in the Fellowship. In my time with the young members of the Fellowship, those in the late twenties and early thirties, I began to note elements of disillusionment among them because of institutional tensions and schisms.

One member who was born into the Fellowship spoke with me and requested that I not record our conversation and also asked that I keep her anonymous in my study. Since my conversation with her was so enlightening, I use my field notes to speak about them as I think it illustrates one of the critical tendencies plaguing the first wave of children born into the Fellowship. Growing up in the Fellowship she experienced it as containing the “cultural baggage of Islam.” The Fellowship had its own particular culture that meant that there was no drinking, no drugs, and no dating or premarital sex, as per teachings of Bawa. One anecdote she expressed, articulated this well. Even though she attended a public school in Philadelphia, her mother allowed her to miss school on Fridays if she attended *khutbah* at the Fellowship *masjid*. She did this once and this ended up being the only time she ever attended because she could not sit through the “fire and brimstone” sermon given by imam Miller. And so she opted to stay in school on Fridays. She had extremely loving memories of Bawa, even though her first experience of death was with the passing of Bawa when she was three years old.

The Fellowship for her was like a second home. After school she would go to the Fellowship and do her homework and spend time with other children. But as she became older, she began to observe many of the tensions between varying personalities within the Fellowship. Issues of voting that took place on whether the Fellowship was a Muslim community or not was one that she remembered vividly, the end of which usually left people upset with certain members. This was repeated again with the recent debates about homosexuality within the Fellowship. She expressed with tears in her eyes that “the Fellowship will be my birth story and it will be my death story as well.” At times of immense tension, she has kept a distance from the Fellowship, saying that often she listens to meetings online through Shoutcast and does not physically attend. She is still very much involved and connected with members outside of the Fellowship, especially as many young people have left the community over recent debates about the Fellowship’s stance on homosexuality. As this young member relayed to me very insightfully with such situations (i.e., during debates of religious identity or stances on ethics and morality) that “the answer always has to be yes, and no and a very, very strong maybe. When you think about it that way then one opens up to the possibility of understanding these issues on multiple layers i.e., the *shariat* [law], *tariqat* [path], *haqiqat* [truth] and *marifat* [gnosis].” In her immediate experiences of the debates that persisted over the Fellowship’s official stance on homosexuality, she felt resulted in irreparable relations, especially inter-generationally. Some young people meet privately on their own to discuss Bawa’s teachings outside of the Fellowship. Such fractions may be the beginning of the formal branching off of lineages that lead back to Bawa, but with particular ancillary leaders who favour specific interpretations of his teachings.

Jacob presents us with a contrasting perspective. Jacob was the first member of the Fellowship I met. When I was in my undergraduate studies at York University in Toronto, I



learned about Bawa in my Islamic Mysticism seminar and e-mailed Philadelphia to try to receive more information about Bawa, his teachings and his communities. I received an email response connecting me with Jacob, who was also a student at York University at the time. We met for coffee in the student center food court on campus and he brought with him some discourses of Bawa and shared more information with me. I learned from our first meeting that Jacob's parents were senior students of Bawa. It was Jacob who also informed me of the branch in Toronto and invited me to the youth/children's meetings which took place on Saturday morning years ago.

Since our first meeting seven years ago I have maintained contact with Jacob. So I was grateful to sit down with him again in Toronto after my years of studying Bawa, his teachings and his communities and ask him about his thoughts about growing up in the Fellowship and what he felt was his part in the future of this community:

And to me like it's not, like it's not in my hands, it's not in anyone else's hands. It's really in Bawa's hands. And as Umar [a member of the Fellowship] says, you know, he says Bawa's the one controlling the Fellowship. You know, at the end of the day it's his institution and spiritually speaking its true [...]. So I think as far as my part goes, I love going there and I love doing duty in the kitchen and meeting people and having awesome conversation [...] and doing *salat*, that's really fun. And really uplifting and spiritual and all of that, but at the same time it's just a place, it's like the true, I think the true change comes in here [heart] and that's for everyone no matter where you are. And he said too, Bawa said too, some of my followers, like true believers, they've never met me. Maybe they didn't come here but the heart of the connection is the same. So that's kind of the spirit I look at it as, as well. It's not necessarily external, actually it's almost nothing has to be external if you

think about it right. Its really the internal where we are, our intention and like are how we connect ourselves. So to me it's like an ongoing process. And like it's been a constant inspiration for me to act in a good way, yeah.<sup>469</sup>

Young members like Jacob gravitate towards particular senior students of Bawa. It is by building these personal relationships that they they foster ongoing understandings of Bawa. Jacob affirms in his comments above that where elders of the Fellowship look to members like Jacob as the future of the Fellowship, he does not see it that way. Rather, he upholds that the Fellowship is only in Bawa's hands. And he goes on to assert that ultimately the Fellowship is a state of being, not an external institution. That being said, Jacob has felt the pressures from elders of the community who have asked for him to be a leader among the youth. But as he notes below, the Fellowship is generally composed of an older demographic or young children, which often isolates the young people from participating.

Jacob: I did a couple and like I had different ideas of doing like media nights and this and that but like it just, it's a different demographic because there are very young people, maybe a few people my age or like you know, gen xs or generation y who may be interested but there's only a few. And like and the thing too with the Fellowship it's like everyone will come and what they experience depends upon who they meet. And they may get a really sour experience and that's it for them. Whereas other people, they don't need that. They just read the books, they like listening to the discourses and that's how I am too, as well.

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<sup>469</sup> Interview with author, Starbucks, Toronto, Canada. May 2, 2014.

Like I remember going once and like somebody was like “oh you should come every *dhikr*” you know that’s what Bawa wants. And it’s like well, you know, maybe. But there’s so many things I’ve heard. Like I had a good friend, and she’s a friend of my parents too, and she hasn’t gone for many years to the Fellowship. But we had a good conversation when I was in Philly in 2006. And she said like I’ve gone a couple of times but she went to the mosque once and she felt super weird because someone came behind her, a woman, and put a shawl on her head. She’s like the fact that someone would think like that’s their right to do that, like I’m in prayer, how can you judge another person’s prayer? Like that’s rough. But she said she remembered like working in the garden and [...], Bawa would be talking to her and she’d be wearing what someone might say immodest clothing, right. She’d be working in the garden; she’s really sweaty, in shorts, t-shirt. Bawa never saw any of that. And that’s sort of the perspective too [...]. I don’t want to say I have to galvanize youth; maybe that’s not what it needs. Maybe he just needs, maybe the Fellowship should work in a way that’s, you know, outside the box right? In my everyday life, in my relationships with people, and you know that’s exactly what that woman said too. She said someone told her “oh, you don’t do *dhikr*?” And this is in the ‘70s. Bawa says that if you don’t do *dhikr* you’ll go to hell. And so she obviously she’s like “oh I never heard this” and she’s like “you know Bawa, this person said this to me.” And he said to her like “do you love your children?” [She says] “Yes.” [Bawa says] “Do you feed them with love? Do you change their diaper with love?” [She says] “Yes.” [Bawa replies] “Then at which point haven’t you been doing *dhikr*?” You know. So like at the end of the day the spiritual connections are a lot more subtle than, behind the scenes, than we might think, you know?<sup>470</sup>

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<sup>470</sup> Interview with author, Starbucks, Toronto, Canada. May 2, 2014.

Highlighted in Jacob's remarks are the negotiations that he has to go through to navigate the teachings and interpretations of Bawa. Different members of the Fellowship are now presenting their own individual understandings of Bawa, his teachings and the Fellowship to young people and new members. For young people like Jacob, who were born into a community and inherited a particular cultural and religious identity that is the Fellowship, the struggle is now to define what the Fellowship means to them personally. Parents, be it those of Jacob's, or any of the senior students in the Fellowship went through their own personal seeking and arrived at the feet of a *shaykh* after they experimented with various paths and spiritual traditions. Children born into the Fellowship inherit an identity, though what they are inheriting is really multiple interpretations of identities.

The complexity of growing up in the Fellowship must also be situated in the broader milieu of America, namely within broader currents of Islamophobia and anti-Sufi sentiments.<sup>471</sup> Those born into the Fellowship have inherited a cultural and religious identity that is "Islamic" in nature. One member, who I met during a guest lecture I delivered on the Fellowship at a small liberal arts college outside New York, expressed to me that she often did not share with her friends from Christian backgrounds that she was Muslim when they asked her what her religion was. If anyone from a Muslim background (or immigrants, i.e., culturally and religious Muslim) asked she also would not identify as Muslim, specifically a Sufi, as she felt that being a child born into a Sufi community also meant for more scorn from Muslims, but she also feared that her authenticity as a Muslim would be questioned, because she was a Euro-American who grew up in Pennsylvania. This young female's comments to me quickly capture her own struggle of articulating a complex inherited identity within the larger American landscape.

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<sup>471</sup> For a discussion of anti-Sufism and Islamophobia please see Chapter 1's subsection *Negotiating Diversity in Sufism in an Age of Islamophobia and Anti-Sufism*.

Those born into the Fellowship have new challenges that their parents did not experience. Therefore, identifying oneself as a Muslim, Sufi or even a Fellowship member is not an option for some children growing up in this community.

These early narratives illustrate that young people in the Fellowship have to negotiate their identity not only in relation to a community they were born in, which itself cannot be definitely labeled, but must also contend with the social environment in which some of the labels ascribed to the Fellowship, such as Islam and Sufism, are presented in polarizing ways. Do they practice Islam because their parents do or do not? What if they do not find affinity to Bawa or his teachings, but only find affinity to the *masjid* and Islam? What if the diversity perpetuated in practice in the Fellowship contrasts with the real world that it is too challenging to be a part of both? What their parents worked through, the children born into the Fellowship must now contend with. For some, these identities are not challenging at all. They have embraced Sufism and its relationship with Islam easily. For others it is Bawa that they are connected with and not Islam. When I asked Jacob where he stands amidst all of these dynamics, he explained:

To me it's always been both. Like I've always, like whenever I read his writings or listen to a discourse or watch a discourse video, or whatever it might be, like to me there's no disconnect between when he's talking about you know Hinduism for example or Christianity or Islam. To me I look at it as a very inward realm. So like I don't know if it's like to me I don't consider myself to be anything other than like when I look at what I want to be, Sufi and Islam, that's kind for the road that I look at it as. But at the same time like I have no problem with anyone who says oh, you know, we consider ourselves Hindu [...]. It's a lot

more of an organic process than just labeling yourself. And I think that's another interesting part is that when people label themselves it's kind of presumptuous thing to do to say you know, Bawa is, he's Muslim. He's only for the Muslims. When it's like he, himself, Bawa himself was rejected by Muslims. So it's like, and he said that himself, you know, the Muslims call me a crazy Hindu and Hindus call me a crazy Muslim, you know. I'm just crazy for God, so, you know. So like I don't know, I don't see necessarily a difference between that but at the same time I like, my understanding comes through that lens of understanding Bawa as implicitly Islamic.<sup>472</sup>

Jacob is cognizant of the diversity of approaches found within the Fellowship, as a result of who Bawa was. In the midst of this diversity, Jacob is critical of those who "presumptuously" label Bawa, yet in spite of this he still personally comes to understand Bawa "as implicitly Islamic."

These perspectives in no way capture all the diverse representations of the voices that one finds at the Fellowship among the young people. I do suggest that the young people, especially in Philadelphia, have a significant role in the future of the Fellowship. And as noted with the older students in the Fellowship, those born into the Fellowship also have to work through what the Fellowship means and who Bawa is for them. What they decide and if they remain affiliated with the Fellowship, will have a significant role in determining the future of the Fellowship. This remains the case not only in Philadelphia, but also in all the branches in North America.<sup>473</sup>

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<sup>472</sup> Interview with author, Starbucks, Toronto, Canada. May 2, 2014.

<sup>473</sup> These inter-generational issues are of course not unique to the Fellowship by any means. Such issues were also noted by the Senior Lecturer in Modern Islam at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter Suha Taji-Farouki. In her study of *Beshara and Ibn Arabi* (2007), a spiritual movement based on the teachings of Ibn Arabi in the United Kingdom, she found that similar intergenerational issues. She writes of the future of the Beshara community, "Some of these offsprings have become deeply involved and have answered a recent for 'the next generation' to come forward, so number of them (perhaps half, according to one associate) are disinterested and others look disdainfully upon their parent's involvement" (2007, 237).

The other trend that I propose will influence the future of the Fellowship are the new members who have come to the Fellowship since Bawa's physical passing. Some of these members are enthusiastic about the community and devoted to Bawa, suggesting that they could also take on future leadership positions, if able to do so. Their influence through their presence was made evident in discussions of the Fellowship and the *mazar*.<sup>474</sup> New members are joining, either through word of mouth and relationships with current members of the Fellowship and most especially through online social networks, such as Facebook, blogs and the presence of the Fellowship website. The level of involvement and commitment these new members bring, especially with their newfound fervour and devotion, may translate into roles that they occupy either in the Fellowship Headquarters or in branches they are part of closer to their homes. This type of involvement, if it remains long-term, will be important. For instance, new members, such as those in Toronto, establish connection with other Sufi communities and may even send discourses of Bawa to their family and friends internationally.<sup>475</sup> This is what some of the members in Toronto have done in sending materials to Karachi, Pakistan, where a new branch is slowly forming. Therefore new members might also be invested in spreading Bawa's messages beyond the Fellowship and aim to bring more people to the community.

Additionally, branches, such as those in Toronto also showcase an example of the marriage of leadership of new members and senior students of Bawa, one that may play out in the Fellowship Headquarters. In Toronto new members, from predominately Muslim countries such as East Africa and Iran, serve with senior students of Bawa on the Executive Committee together. They make institutional decisions together, navigating varying understandings of

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<sup>474</sup> For discussion of new members, visitors and pilgrims at the Fellowship please see Chapter 2's subsection *Piety and Devotions at the Fellowship* and Chapter 3's subsection *Negotiating the Sacred at the Mazar of Bawa*.

<sup>475</sup> Such instances of new members establishing connections were seen in relation to the *mazar* in Chapter 3, please see subsection *Negotiating the Sacred at the Mazar of Bawa*.

gender, religion (Islamic/Sufi), while of course giving precedent to Bawa's teachings. Will such an assemblage take place in Philadelphia? This may be possible if the second generation of followers of Bawa do become seminal leaders together with the new members of the Fellowship. These possibilities point to the factors that will impact the future of the Fellowship and its manifestation. Taken in light with some of the rituals and practices, such as pilgrimages to *mazars* and commemoration of the *mawlid*, it is when embodied practices meets institutional definitions that one begins to unpack the complex webs of possibilities of what the Fellowship could become, centered of course on the personage of Bawa and his teachings.

#### **“The Pond”- A Letter to the Fellowship from Bawa**

During the life of Bawa the Fellowship experienced moments of institutional dissonance, as members of the Fellowship were contending with varying issues from the religious identity of the community to interpretations of Bawa's teachings. Bawa remained the ultimate source that was physically present to arbitrate these issues. This process of negotiating the varying interpretations of the members of the community is now in the hands of the Executive Committee, a task that must be approached with “Love and Wisdom” according to Section 2, part B, 5

the members of the Executive Committee should not entertain attitudes that are more appropriate for the conduct of worldly business. Voting is a practice of political organizations and should not be practiced here. Decisions should be unanimous. What should be practiced here is Love and Wisdom. If a unanimous decision cannot be



reached, the matter should be referred to the Chief Executive or his successor(s) for decision. Such decisions shall be binding on the Executive Committee (1979, 7).

Members of the Executive Committee through “Love and Wisdom” must reach a “unanimous decision” with regards to any institutional matters. Thus far this is how the Fellowship has functioned. Issues emerged within the Fellowship right after Bawa’s death, especially of succession as Sufi teachers and Islamic scholars from other communities visited the Fellowship in attempts to “overtake” the Fellowship. Other times, it is the question of what the Fellowship is (i.e., is it a Sufi, Islamic or spiritual community), which has riddled the committees, leading to meetings, letters from members and finally votes. The outcomes and even the process of sifting through these issues have resulted in many members of the Fellowship leaving the community all together.

Bawa required “compassion” towards each other in the name of God. This is captured repeatedly throughout his discourses and reaffirmed in the preamble to the by-laws to the “presidents, secretaries, treasurers, and all other children” where it is written:

These are the ways in which all of you should act, and the qualities, characteristics and conduct that you should imbibe. In the same way that the one God bestows His Compassion on all beings, without any animosities and provides them with food and love, and protects them, all the children in the Fellowship must imbibe Divine Qualities and be tolerant, and forbearing, and preach the good Wisdom, and embrace everyone with love. This is a Divine characteristic and the first thing that I have to say to you is that all those who are seeking God should first achieve His Qualities (1979, 1).

The preamble goes on to state

All of the Prophets of God, that is Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Moses, David, Jesus, Mohammed, Job, Joseph, Jonah and all of the 124000 of them were faced with innumerable distresses, hostilities and satanic animosities. They had to face the many divisions that arose in the unity of God and they had to face several other difficulties. In the midst of all these things, without paying heed to was the Divine Commandments; not their own difficulties. Similarly, whatever difficulties you might be faced with, without being set back by them you must find happiness in God's happiness. It is the Grace of Truth and the plentitude of it that you must spread to the creatures of the world (1979, 1).

Usually members voice their opinions with regards to different interpretations of Bawa's teachings in the form of letter writing campaigns. These letters are used by groups or those who share interpretational tendencies to pool letters together by supporting one outlook over another, which are then sent to Executive Committee members who ultimately must contend with these issues, as it is stated in Section B. 8:

Since there are various kinds of problems in the world and since there are people in all states of being in the world, the Fellowship may receive letters from various parties. If the letters are hostile or unfavourable, they should be dealt with by people in the Executive without letting everybody know about it. To do so is wrong. In dealing with

such situations, Peacefulness and Forbearance should be employed There should be no haste (1979, 7).

When I was in Philadelphia during April 2013, the Fellowship was reeling from a difficult few months when tensions were high. This time the issue was with regards to the Fellowship's stance on homosexuality and questions assisted reproductive technology. One of the members, born into the Fellowship, was a lesbian, who had now married and was expecting a child. This growing family wanted to raise their children in the Fellowship. Many letters were written by members, which presented polarizing stances on these particular issues. Needless to say, such divisive moments in the history of a young spiritual community are formative. During this particular situation, perhaps the contingency of the community that was most affected were the younger members who grew up together and were split in terms of who to side with, a friend they knew or a community that they were deeply imbedded within.

I arrived to do fieldwork as these issues was being negotiated and many members of the Fellowship were immensely apprehensive of my presence even more so because the residue of anxiety that was fresh in the air. During this time, it was Bawa's teachings that members of the Fellowship found solace in. One particular discourse of Bawa was re-translated, re-published and shared again during weekend meetings, as a means to offer healing. It was a discourse entitled, "the Pond", which was given by Bawa on September 17, 1972 in Jaffna, Sri Lanka.<sup>476</sup> Bawa gave this discourse specifically as a response to a letter he received from a member of the Fellowship in Philadelphia who was struggling with institutional dissonance when Bawa was in Jaffna.<sup>477</sup> In

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<sup>476</sup> Synder in his thesis also uses the metaphor of "pond of Wisdom" to frame the Fellowship (2003).

<sup>477</sup> I requested to listen to this audio myself, so that I could translate it from Tamil personally. But for some reason the archivist said that they did not have it and that I would have to ask members personally if they had copies of this

Bawa's response, he referred to the Fellowship as a "pond," explaining that within the pond, there are many different creatures and organisms that come to access water:

So, this is how there are some problems now in the Fellowship. Since this is a place of God, it is a place where all who are thirsty should be able to come and quench their thirst. This is their legitimate right. As all creatures went to the pond to quench their thirst because water is necessary for their life, so the divine water is necessary for the thirst of the soul. Therefore, even if their wisdom is not quite mature, all who come to the Fellowship need to quench their thirst. They may even sometimes soil the place in their efforts. Man's duty is only to cleanse the place, not to find fault with those who have soiled it (Muhaiyaddeen 1991, 18).

The response offered by Bawa was that those who visit the pond, from any walk of life, should always be welcome. To welcome someone and to share the quenching of thirst can be disorienting, especially if the one who stands beside you at the pond is so dramatically different in form from oneself. Yet it is the need to transcend labels and distinctions that make the pond so critical, because according to Bawa all need water (be it the animal or the human).

It is the diverse of approaches to Islam, Sufism and spiritualities remains continuous amongst the networks of Bawa. This diversity remains its strength. Exclusion has not been the approach of Bawa, as he relays in his discourse of "the Pond" in which lotus flowers sits in the water while beasts consume water and are not affected by the animals soiling the water. Perhaps more than anything, this was Bawa's purpose in not appointing one leader to succeed his

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discourse, which I did and still was not able to access. So for this particular discourse I rely on the published translation, knowing the limitations this presents, but I use this discourse to present a larger message.

leadership, for one leader might set one trajectory in Bawa's ministry. Bawa gathered people who would not normally have sat in the same room, be it Muslims and Hindus in Jaffna or African-Americans and Euro-Americans in Philadelphia in the 1970s. He was able to maintain a sense of cohesion because of his discussion of the "one truth." He united based on this premise alone and then subsequently served anyone who came to him according to his or her needs. Bawa's establishment of all his ministries from Mankumban to the *ashram* to Philadelphia to the farm was in essence the development of concurrent spaces as a means to cater to the many needs of his followers. They were both a testament to his ability to be a teacher who provided many resources as teaching tools and his diverse students who were able to utilize what they wanted and needed. From Jaffna to Philadelphia I was told that Bawa never required conversion or formal allegiance, as often practiced by Sufi teachers. As Bawa expressed in the discourse of "the Pond":

Therefore, all will converge at a common place to quench this thirst. However they will not leave their individual nature behind; they will bring it with them. The place to quench this thirst is common to all. It is the divine vibration that pulls them there. No one has a right to say, "why did he come? Why did this bull come? or "What did that lion come? Why did that tiger come? This pond is common ground for all. All have come to quench their thirst. If they do succeed in quenching their thirst, then their nature will also change. As the divine taste develops, then, their natural qualities will drop off. Whatever their different natures might be, the attraction is only One. You all must deeply understand this with your wisdom (1991, 9).

In a newsletter printed in 1990 in the Matale Branch in Central Kandy, the late Rahaman (d. 2004) writes, “To man, the Grace of the Sheikh is what water is to plants. It is not the duty of the rain to make plants accept his water. The rain can’t do this, He offers water but the plants must drink from themselves” (no pagination). Bawa and his teachings are represented by water, water that as noted he set up in every space he established, be it Mankumban, the *ashram*, Philadelphia or his *mazar* in Coatesville. The purpose of water is similar to the “ecosystem” that is the “pond” or the Fellowship. The pond sustains the diverse organisms and creatures that come to it by providing water. The Fellowship is this ecosystem; its purpose is to ensure that the creatures that come to it have access to the water, the water provided by Bawa to his disciples. Bawa’s metaphors of the pond and water are poignant in light of the tenth century Persian Sufi Junayd who expressed, “Sufism takes on the colour of its cup” (quoted in Chittick 1989, 341). From Jaffna to Pennsylvania, it is this hue, as it has distinctively manifested that captures the transnational spaces, communities and devotees of Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyadddeen.

## **Conclusions**

With the physical passing of a Sufi teacher, it is common in most Sufi communities that a successor, either through hereditary ties or an exemplary disciple, is appointed as the new leader. However, such was not the case in Bawa’s ministries. The lack of appointment has resulted in unique developments across his spaces and has led to diverse interpretations of orthopraxy. Even though Bawa remains the solitary spiritual authority, there have arisen on the quotidian basis ancillary leaders, either through the formal appointment as members on the Executive Committee or Board of Trustees or even as matron of spaces associated with Bawa. The extent to which these individuals perform their roles and maintain positions of ancillary authority is a

sensitive matter. As it is understood that such roles should not and does not take away from the ultimate and ever-present authority of Bawa, still the Fellowship must forge ahead in its institutional and administrative objectives.

This chapter anticipated the future of the Fellowship by exploring its constitutional by-laws. Knowing that institutional mandates can in no way define the rhetoric of those who form the Fellowship, I couched the by-laws with responses by some Fellowship members to the question of *what is the Fellowship*. I received responses that ranged from the metaphysical state of being (the Fellowship in our hearts) to the practical (for disseminating Bawa's teachings). Imam Miller of the Fellowship *masjid* compared the philosophy of inclusion of all and purity as the directive of the Bawa and the Fellowship found in Islam. For Nur Sharon Marcus, an Executive Member of the Toronto Branch, transcending all religions to reach the path beyond any form, which she understood as Sufism, was what the Fellowship is.

In trying to understand the questions of succession and future visions of the Fellowship, I shifted to the by-laws of the Serendib Sufi Study Circle to compare if how the communities of Bawa formed in Sri Lanka can shed light on the future of the Fellowship in Philadelphia. The central authority and devotion to Bawa was reaffirmed throughout and individuals affiliated with certain spaces or branches rose up as ancillary leaders of those spaces. Though in both institutions the question remains who will constitute the next iteration of the Fellowship or the Circle? In Jaffna at the *ashram* and Mankumban, it appears this role might be fulfilled by Hindu devotees who have been generationally devoted to Bawa, though this will be at the negotiation of the official remaining leaders of the Serendib Study Sufi Circle in Colombo. In Philadelphia this will similarly fall to the next generation of the current disciples of Bawa. Additionally, new

members, primarily immigrant members from Muslim majority nations, will also have a role in the future of the Fellowship.

In Chapter 7 in this section I explored the numerous titles that have been attributed to Bawa by his disciples, including those of *swami* and *Qutb*. I concluded that all these names were really the manifestation of the state of *insan al-kamil*, a state that Bawa's disciples ascribed to him but also a state that Bawa taught all his followers to aspire to. It is for this reason that I situated this as the central teaching of Bawa. This led then to Chapter 8 wherein the roles of women in Bawa's communities from Pennsylvania to Jaffna were explored. In this chapter I situated the role of women in classical Sufi contexts but also in contemporary examples, specifically in ancillary and leadership roles found in Sufism in South Asia. The rituals were unpacked, such as the *mawlid*s in the Fellowship, or spaces such as the *masjid* in Philadelphia in relation to gendered spaces. In doing so, it became apparent that these narratives of ritual practices and spaces were far more complicated. The analysis of rituals and spaces showcased examples of both female engagement and restriction. When taken as a whole, rituals and spaces provided a far more complicated reality of female presence in Sufism in North America. Additionally, however, in shifting to Jaffna, I highlighted the role of the matron at the *ashram* and the significance of Maryam and the *masjid-mazar* complex of Mankumban. In studies of Sufism in North America it is often suggested that female egalitarianism is the norm, this case study resisted this trend as in Jaffna, and the root of the North American community, female presence, in both non-official leadership position (the matron) and as a focus of a shrine (Maryam) was evident. The latter female authority and spaces were not found in North America. I proposed that when approaching the role of women in the Fellowship or in the Circle, scholars should make strides in creating further nuance in such studies.



Both the Serendib Sufi Study Circle (SSSC) and the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship (BMF) are at the crossroads of competing visions of their future. From participating in pilgrimages to the *mazar* of Bawa and/or Maryam to listening to recitations of *mawlid*s or the discourses by Bawa, it is the members, devotees, disciples and pilgrims who give meaning to the communities of Bawa. The latter practices and acts of pieties challenge singular definitions of the Fellowship and the Circle, as I have been suggesting throughout this study. The utilization of the varying spaces by the diverse individuals who come to the Fellowship and its network of communities form a valuable component of the communities of Bawa. Leaders must accept those who utilize the spaces and the diverse religious and cultural communities the Fellowship and the Circle attracts. As Bawa states in his discourse of “The Pond” quoted in this chapter, the goal is not to divide, but to accept a common thirst for water, that all who came to the pond share. Bawa is representative of the water held in the pond, while his institutions form the system that contains this water, just like the pond he describes in his own discourse. Many come to him seeking mundane and spiritual blessings. It is not up to the leaders and members to determine the classification of the pond, but rather their purpose is to maintain the pond so that all who thirst for Bawa might quench that thirst without limitation.

From Pennsylvania to Jaffna, this study has traced the phenomenon that is Bawa Muhaiyaddeen through his ministry, which has manifested immense diversity, a diversity that is not inherent solely to the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, but one that is indeed replicated in the root of this community in the Serendib Sufi Study Circle. In doing so, this case study has not only highlighted the global diversity of a Sufi community from North America to Sri Lanka, but it has also emphasized the fluidity of a singular Sufi community which contains distinct Muslim, Hindu, Jewish and Christian followers.

## **Conclusions**

The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship is a significant Sufi movement in the study of Sufism in North America. Though it may not necessarily have prominence in members, the popularization and expansive transnational networks of Bawa and his communities makes for a distinctive case study in the analysis of contemporary Sufism, both as it has locally manifested and as it has translated into global communities. The uniqueness of this community is also evident in its transnational shrine cultures in America and Sri Lanka. From Pennsylvania to Jaffna and other North American centers, the Fellowship now has members from Toronto establishing branches in Karachi, Pakistan. The Fellowship has been one of the first Sufi communities to be theorized in scholarship of Sufism in North America, which further makes the Fellowship an intriguing community for analysis of the continuities and transformations in the study of contemporary Sufism.

In Gisela Webb's chapter contribution "Tradition and Innovation in Contemporary American Islamic Spirituality: the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship" (1994) one of the many questions that Webb asks is "Can any conclusions be drawn with regard to the question of whether Bawa Muhaiyaddeen and the fellowship function in a 'conserving' manner vis-à-vis 'the tradition' or whether they depart from traditional Islamic values and practice?" (1994, 77) I noted in Chapter 1 of this study that for Webb the Fellowship is an example of "[...] the process of transmission of Islamic belief and practice in the contemporary American context" (1994, 99). The Fellowship captures both Sufism's development in Islamic religious and culture milieus but also its development in non-Islamic contexts. Since Webb's initial investigation of what the Fellowship is, many more scholars have engaged with the same question and in doing so have presented varying typologies and labels (Korom 2012; Hermansen 1997, 2012; Geaves 2004;

Webb 1994, 2013; Snyder 2003). For instance, Hermansen's chapter contribution to the edited volume *South Asian Sufis* (2012) places the Fellowship in the framework of "Islamic sharia" (2012, 247) while in an earlier study she categorized the Fellowship as a "hybrid" movement (1997). Whereas the earliest study completed by a member of this community, Mauroof, understood Bawa's ministry as Islamic in nature with "syncretistic and ecumenical" tendencies (1976, 249).

Webb's (2013) later analysis of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship has been substantial to framing the varying identity politics and institutional processes by suggesting a co-existence of Sufism model, one that points to moments of negotiations and tensions in the definition of what the Fellowship is. The exploration of this question, *what is the Fellowship*, then has been the basis of the current analysis. As a means to understand the possibility of answers to this question, the current study challenged boundaries and borders and travelled to the root of this community in Sri Lanka. In doing so, I highlighted pieties and practices in the Sri Lankan context, illustrating how the development of a singular movement was both localized and globalized. Networks (Cooke and Lawrence 2005; Ho 2006; Werbner 2003; Stenberg and Raudvere 2009; Geaves, Dressler et al. 2009) may point to space, though they are not bounded by them and therefore these spatial orientations allowed for an encounter of pluralistic tendencies of Sufism, not limited to North America, but actually inclusive of South Asia through a continuum. Members, devotees and pilgrims that flow between the Fellowship and the Serendib Sufi Study Circle cut across culture, religions, gender and ethnicities and yet they still maintain uniformity in their devotion to Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, their spiritual leader. In highlighting these ebbs and flows of the Fellowship and its transnational networks, my study apprehended (1) what the Fellowship is in light of (2) contemporary global context Sufism.

## Key Findings

In the first section of the dissertation I situated the sacred and secular sites of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship and its numerous sub-spaces in North America that form the central node of our project. Chapter 1 provided the context for Fellowship, namely the unique history of Sufism in North America, one that emerged out of Orientalist interest in literary traditions of the Persian poetry, which then primed the reception of Sufi teachers, such as Hazrat Inayat Khan (d. 1927) to America. Many more Sufi teachers came to America in the mid to late twentieth century, of whom Bawa was only one example. In this chapter, I also presented the different ways in which the Fellowship is represented in scholarly literature- be it as Sufi community, an example of American Islam or South Asian Islam and/or as an alternative form of spirituality altogether. In doing so, I submitted that the labeling of the Fellowship limits the dynamic that inherently exists within the Fellowship and so I called for a move beyond typologies towards depicting the community's inherent diversity.

In Chapter 2 I began to map the spaces of the Fellowship, starting with the Headquarters in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In this chapter, I captured both the institutional history of this space, along with the various sub-spaces that composes the Fellowship, be it Bawa's room, the Fellowship meeting hall, or the *masjid*. In order to illustrate the ways in which these spaces co-exist together, I provided detailed descriptions of each space and also explored how these spaces were transformed through rituals and meetings. For instance, *mawlid* celebration for the Prophet Muhammad is one ritual practice that is held in the Fellowship, in which females congregate in Bawa's room while the males gather in the Arabic classroom. This celebration also attracts diverse members of the Fellowship, including those from Muslim backgrounds who seek the blessings acquired in the participation of a *mawlid*, along with disciples of Bawa who come to

commemorate a tradition he instituted. This chapter then began to point to the ways in which the diverse orientations found within the Fellowship actually negotiate with new members and pilgrims' presence while maintaining a shared space.

Chapter 3 engaged with one of the most formative sites of the Fellowship, but also of Sufism in North America, and that is the *mazar* of Bawa in Coatesville, Pennsylvania. This site, more than the Fellowship itself, has gained the most attention since it attracts pilgrims from across the globe. Importantly though, it has become a space of significance in American Islam because it enables the completion of pilgrimage to a Sufi saint's tomb in North America, a practice that has been intrinsic to the development of Sufism across history and space. This is not to deny the significance of Bawa's *mazar* for the members of the Fellowship, as it is the final resting place of Bawa. So just like the Fellowship Headquarters in Philadelphia, Bawa's *mazar* in Coatesville has also become a sacred space in which diverse orientations are negotiated. In the case of the *mazar* these orientations are equally expansive- they include Sufi pilgrims and devoted disciples. In highlighting the narratives of pilgrims and the Fellowship members in this chapter, I pointed not only to the creation of a Sufi pilgrimage practice in North America, but also to the ways in which diverse Islamic, Sufi and spiritual identities are unfolding at the *mazar* of Bawa. The arrival of new pilgrims required adjustment from members of the Fellowship, as pilgrims brought with them practices that challenged some protocols kept by the Fellowship shrine keepers. Such differences between the protocol of *mazars* in South Asian context (where most of the pilgrims are from) and Bawa's *mazar* in Coatesville, I suggested, might signal a significant point of departure in the development of American *mazars*.

In the study of the Fellowship in North America, it has been suggested that the Fellowship's diversity is due to its American origins. But Section II tested this hypothesis by

shifting to the root of the Fellowship in Sri Lanka. Chapter 4 oriented Sri Lanka, the country wherein Bawa first developed his institutions. In this chapter I highlighted that Sufism played a formative role in the development of Islam on the island, especially amongst shared sacred spaces such as Dafther Jailani or Adam's Peak. This chapter also situated the climate of ethnic strife and communal violence based on competing linguistic, religious and ethnic identities, especially between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority. Muslims were caught in-between these nationalisms, one that led to nearly three decades of civil war. It is in this context that Bawa's ministry first emerged in Sri Lanka. Situating the development of Bawa's ministry in Sri Lanka within a milieu that was deeply riddled with ethno-linguistic and religious communal violence challenges the claim that the Fellowship developed as a pluralistic community only in America. Because as subsequent chapters in this section capture Bawa's ministries in Sri Lanka, especially in Jaffna, are as religiously diverse as its American counterpart, despite a culture of violence and ethnic strife.

Chapter 5 focused on mapping the Sri Lankan spaces of Bawa, especially the Serendib Sufi Study Circle in Colombo, the Matale Branch in central Kandy and Bawa's residence or *ashram* in Jaffna. Like Bawa's headquarters and its sub-spaces in America, this chapter highlighted the varying sub-spaces in Bawa's institutions in Sri Lanka. In Colombo, as in Philadelphia, a room with Bawa's personal items and his bed were located, which served as the central sacred orientation in which devotion and acts of pieties took place. The emphasis in this chapter was Bawa's *ashram*, which is kept as a shrine. This space in Jaffna is unique as those who utilize the *ashram* and participate in daily prayers or in breaking fast during Ramadan are mainly Tamil Hindu devotees. They participate in ritual activity by singing devotions to Bawa and blessings to the Prophet Muhammad. Devotees in the *ashram* were also generationally part of Bawa's

community.

In Chapter 6 a seminal sacred space that paralleled Bawa's *mazar* in Coatesville Pennsylvania was highlighted. On Velanai Island, in northern Sri Lanka, stands a unique and parallel site in our networks of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. Mankumban, which is a *masjid-mazar* complex, is a shrine dedicated to Maryam and Bawa. Hindus and Muslims in the region also use it for daily prayers and the commemoration of Ramadan and *mawlid*s. With the end of the civil war, pilgrims from North America and beyond have once again begun pilgrimages to these spaces, creating larger circuits of movements between the different nodes of Bawa's communities, all sharing in their primary devotion to Bawa (Ho 2006; Eade and Sallnow 1991; Schomburg 2003; Sikand 2007; Werbner 2004; Rozehnal 2009). These parallel institutional developments i.e., shrines, mosques and centers of communal living (*ashram*, Fellowship center, and Coatesville) were the focus of Sections I and II.

The final section of the study engaged with questions of authority, gender and institution, in light of the new map of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship and the Serendib Sufi Study Circle. The first crosscutting theme that was traced from Pennsylvania to Jaffna was the absolute centrality of the figure of Bawa. With Bawa's passing he has been further solidified as a Sufi saint. In Chapter 7 Bawa's titles of *swami*, *Qutb* and *shaykh* were explored using the voices of the members of the Fellowship. I concluded that these different epithets acquired by Bawa both in his life and his death signal to his primary teaching of the state of perfected human being or *insan al-kamil*. His devotees attribute the state of *insan al-kamil* to Bawa, but it is also a teaching that formed the center of Bawa's ministries, especially in America. He challenged all of his disciples to become perfected beings, and return to humanity's original disposition.

Chapter 8 went on to discuss the presence of women in Sufism in North America. Though

the topic of women in Sufism in North America has yet to be fully explored in scholarship, initial literature has suggested that female presence (i.e, in leadership positions) in Sufi communities in North America is unique a trend. In the case of the Fellowship, women are active members as Executive Committee members, translators and editors of Bawa's discourses and as leaders of meetings held regularly in the Fellowship. They do not have formal leadership authority in the *masjid*, which created tension in the construction of the mosque by Bawa. The relegation of women behind men, even though women were some of the earliest members praying and even leading *salat*, caused some concern for active American female disciples of Bawa. Still, I further challenged monolithic narratives of spaces, such as the *masjid* and rituals, such as the *mawlid*, by presenting multidimensional perspectives and experiences of one space or ritual by varying members of the Fellowship. By relaying two perspectives of one experience, of either the *masjid* or the *mawlid*, I highlighted how narratives of female Sufi presence in North America needs further nuance.

Having been acquainted with Bawa's communities in Sri Lanka, I was able to compare the role of women in the Serendib Sufi Study Circle to determine if female presence in the Fellowship in America is a unique phenomenon. In shifting orientations I found that it was not the case as scholarship has suggested. The notable roles of the matron and women at the *ashram* and the *masjid-mazar* complex dedicated to Maryam by Bawa, provided new bearings that challenged the American landscape as being the reason for why women were indeed prominent in the Fellowship. It also suggests that within Sufism, women negotiate their authority and presence through ancillary spaces and rituals, while the feminine ideal was also maintained, at least metaphysical thought.

The final chapter then re-visited the question that began this study's exploration in the first



place: *what is the Fellowship?* This chapter analyzed the constitutional and legal definitions of the purposes and functions of the Fellowship, as it is mandated to this day. As a way of comparison, the same was done for the Serendib Sufi Study Circle (SSSC). The chapter moved on, however, to trace the varying definitional approaches and understandings of the Fellowship as articulated the Fellowship members. This chapter then brings the different interpretations of the Fellowship in conversation with each other to complement the everyday experiences I illustrated through ritual activity in Bawa's spaces in Sections I and II. For the first time in the scholarship of this community, members and leaders of the Fellowship express who they are and how they relate to the Fellowship. In doing so, members and leaders of the Fellowship challenged any monolithic definition of their own community and as such problematized the use of any singular label to represent their identity, space or even Bawa.

Even though a singular label cannot be given to the Fellowship, the community internally then is at a crossroads because of its inherent diversity. With no appointed leader and a range of Sufi outlooks, what will the future of the Fellowship be? I did not provide an answer to this question, rather I pointed to two influential factors that will set the path for the future of the Fellowship, which includes (1) the second and third generation of those born into the Fellowship and (2) new immigrants who are now actively involved in the Fellowship. The degree to which these two contingencies of the Fellowship interact with each other and work together will define how the Fellowship continues to grow, especially as senior disciples of the Fellowship will decrease.

I concluded this chapter by looking to Bawa's vision of the Fellowship, especially since the Fellowship experienced moments of institutional dissonance during Bawa's tenure. In one such instance, he delivered a letter to his Fellowship from Jaffna entitled, "The Pond" in 1972. In this

letter to his disciples he employs the analogy of a pond, or a rich water based ecosystem that is imbued with diverse organisms. He reminds members that when one arrives to access water at the pond, one's primary focus should not be to judge those who are standing beside you also accessing water. Rather the interest in coming to the "Pond" is to access the "water" (or truth). The pond, which contains water, will attract diverse creatures, but it should not distract one from the main purpose, with is accessing the One Truth.

My research of the Fellowship reconciles different scholars attempts to define the Fellowship, for the typologies unto themselves are intrinsically limiting. The Fellowship contains all the tendencies from universal leanings to *shari'a*-based Sufism with a growing immigrant Muslim contingency to varying universal approaches to Sufism and Islam. When one places the Fellowship in only one category, as previous scholarship has attempted to do, one is presented with only a small piece of this diverse and transnational community with varying currents of Islam, Sufism, Hinduism and spirituality. Highlighting these complexities within one community through mobility and embodiment, allows scholars to assess the differing but complementary currents of Sufism, as it co-exists within a singular network. In the context of America and South Asia, wherein our case study is based, Bawa and his communities also then showcase how communities, spaces, identities and interpretations found within this one movement is actually emblematic of the currents found in Sufism as a whole.

These proclivities of Sufism as co-existing within one community should remind scholars that Sufism in lived reality is not homogenous but rather diverse. This inherent plurality has garnered Sufism both its success and its criticism. Sufism as beyond Islam, as encountered in the Fellowship, is what attracts non-Muslim members who seek a universal spirituality. At the same time Sufism attracts immigrant Muslims from regions such as South Asia and the Middle East,

because it resonates with their understanding of Islam. According to some Muslims, Sufi rituals and practices are viewed as non-Islamic or excessive, and as such they attract anti-Sufi vitriol. Yet these rituals, spaces, and practices have developed because of philosophical and theological interpretations of Islam by Sufi teachers. Sufism as a form of universal spirituality is also overlooked as a legacy and current of Islam. These complex interpretations and translations define and redefine Sufism as a lived and experienced spirituality.

This microscopic study of one community also illustrates that the fluidity of the Fellowship was not unique to America, but in fact was a testament to the Bawa's site of origin in Sri Lanka, further affirming the co-existences of Sufism as a lived tradition, not only in America but also in South Asia. These observations should encourage scholars to complete further in-depth and microcosmic studies on Sufi communities, teachers and networks of Sufism in North America to further map and redefine the ways in which to speak of Sufism in North America, but also in transnational and global contexts in relation to other geographical regions. Doing so with communities like the Sufi Order International, Shadhiliyya Sufi Center, Jerrahis and many more, will allow scholars to be cognizant of the broader transnational and global realities of Sufi communities in North America that have relationships either with natal lands of Sufi teachers or pilgrims and devotees that it attracts. This then captures the new terrains and networks of existences and defies boundaries and borders that sometimes preoccupy us with regionalism and localization solely. The local is important to understand, only when it is mapped within larger movements, flows and networks. This approach remained insightful to the current case study.

Our case study connected Pennsylvania to Jaffna through the movement of a Tamil Sufi mystic and his interested and devoted disciples. Both Bawa and his disciples' stories transcended prescribed borders, geographies (both sacred and secular) and identities, because they dwelt in

spaces of in-betweenness. The story of Bawa and the legacy of his disciples across the globe is a story that is North American, for it has deep roots in America but it is also Sri Lankan, as it emerges out of Tamil Islam. In this regard, such legacies are important not only for scholars who theorize about Islam and religions in North America and South Asia, but they are much needed reminders to North American Muslims and non-Muslims of the manifestations of Islam and its influences on non-Islamic and Islamic spiritualities.

The origins of Bawa's ministry in Sri Lanka and its transformation and continuity in America are a poignant narrative in the aftermath of a nearly three decade long war in Sri Lanka. Bawa's story is not one of war but rather of unity and peace, and it comes out of a legacy of Islam and Sufism in Sri Lanka, which was historically cultivated by wandering ascetics, pious pilgrims and traders who traveled across the Indian Ocean for centuries. In journeying from Bawa's place of residence (*ashram*) in Jaffna to his burial tomb (*mazar*) in Coatesville, I have mapped new pathways and travelled on old pilgrimages routes, emphasizing Sufism's transformations in contemporary global contexts.

### **Limitations of the Current Study**

My study has contributed to the study of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship and contemporary Sufism in North America and South Asia because of its multi-sited ethnography but it has also been limited by it. Being the first study of this nature on the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship and the Serendib Sufi Study Circle, the broader mapping of the networks within this community has been the focus, which of course has limited the attention given to each space and region discussed. This is inevitably the challenge of a multi-sited project, as such ethnographic enterprises often neglect finer details in order to capture the larger networks of connections. This is where future studies are needed to remedy the limitations of this one.

My study was also limited in the time I was able to spend in the respective regions, and their subsequent sacred spaces. This was mainly due to the length of my doctoral program, which dedicates only one year to field research. The challenges of coordinating my fieldwork with Islamic religious holy events (that depends on lunar calendar) created limitations. With so many spaces to explore, it meant that I had to divide my time evenly. So where I experienced the *mawlid* in Philadelphia for instance, I did not partake of the same ritual experience in Jaffna, doing so would have added greatly to the comparative analysis that formed my theoretical approach. And where I experienced *iftar* and Ramadan in Jaffna, I was not able to do the same in Philadelphia. Future research on *mawlid*s and Ramadan respectively in Jaffna or Pennsylvania sites needs to be completed to correct this limitation in this study. The same is also true of all the branches that form the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship in North America. This study has only begun to map the communities of Bawa and has given attention to the larger nodes as opposed to the smaller branches, where religious identity formation and ritual and space maintenance are likely to vary.

My limitations in terms of exploring the Sri Lankan sites were also due in part to the challenges of negotiating gender and cultural norms in Sri Lanka as a Tamil-Canadian female researcher. The heightened levels of religious tensions faced by Muslims on the island and the heavy militarization in Jaffna, where I spent most of my time for fieldwork, required unique navigation, that likely would not have emerged in a more stabilized region of fieldwork. These post-war realities were beyond my control. So as (if) the country stabilizes, more long-term research of Bawa's sites in Sri Lanka is needed, especially of sites like Matale in central Kandy or the newly refurbished Puliyanikulam, or the experiences of internally displaced Muslims in Puttalam.

Finally, this study was not meant to present a comprehensive analysis of Bawa's discourses. There are various limitations to studying Bawa's teachings, which have created gaps in scholarships generally and my own use of it in this study. I utilized discourses as it was relevant to the discussion of topics in my study, for instance of the construction of the *masjid* or the ritual practice of the *mawlid*. The selection of discourses of Bawa based on themes limited the discourses I consulted and how I engaged with Bawa's teachings. I also did not have access to languages beyond Tamil and English. This limited my ability to engage with non-English speakers, such as those who speak Urdu, Farsi, Arabic and many more.

### **Recommendations for Future Studies**

This study has also opened up new questions for future studies to explore. In terms of Sri Lanka, of further interest is the need to gather stories of the Muslim devotees of Bawa in the Puttalam refugee camps. The perspective of these displaced Muslims and their devotion to Bawa will add additional nuance to the stories of Bawa's early devotees and capture examples of Islam and Sufism in northern Jaffna, known as a Tamil Hindu region. But such research must only be attempted if the safety of those devotees is in no way jeopardized. Bawa's spaces in Sri Lanka did not develop in a vacuum, but as discussed in Chapter 4, pilgrimages to spaces such as Adam's Peak and Dafther Jailani, is part of an important history in Sri Lanka. These narratives of Sufism in Sri Lanka have not been fully documented yet and thus future studies need to fill this lacuna of scholarship, especially with a monograph or series of studies of Sufism in Sri Lanka.

Scholarship on Tamil Sufism is a rarity in the academy, but to have recorded discourses of a Tamil teacher from Sri Lanka presents a valuable source to begin an investigation into a broader systematization of Islam, Sufism and Hinduism in Sri Lanka. The study of Bawa and his communities in North America and Sri Lanka allows for this possibility. The study of the

Serendib Sufi Study Circle alone could create further inroads to the study of Sufism in Sri Lanka, which have not been completed extensively to date. The development of Bawa's community in Sri Lanka and North America points to an example of the exchanges across the Indian Ocean, one that is the legacy of the emergence of Islam in Sri Lanka. The development of Islam in Sri Lanka, and especially Sufism in Sri Lanka, is embedded within unique political and ethnic realities on the island. These studies can also highlight Sufi teachers and wandering mendicants, similar to Bawa, whose presence likely persists in small villages and corridors of the island.

Sufism only forms one current of Islam and more minority ethnic groups (i.e., Malay or Berbers) and sectarian groups (i.e., Sunni and Shi'a) dynamics also require attention. As such studies of Islam in Sri Lanka need not only include Sufism, but also how reform and revivalist movements, sacred shared spaces and everyday Muslim communities are developing and have developed. Attention to historical and seminal thinkers and leaders, such as activists Siddi Lebbe and his writings or Abdul Azeez, and other reformers who influenced Islamic identity formation in Sri Lanka are illustrative here. In-depth analysis is needed to unpack the trajectory of Islamic identity formation in relation to the global Muslim *ummah* (community) and how it is framed in Sri Lanka, in light of the minority status of Muslims on the island. This is especially the case now, as economic and labour links between Saudi Arabia have created different forms of reformist to revivalist influences in Sri Lanka, the outcome of these relations and movements of ideas require further investigation. All these different ideational processes, both historical and contemporary, are worthy endeavours that can further our understanding of Islam and Sufism as they manifest in Sri Lanka.

Bawa's discourses themselves warrant numerous studies. There are several reasons for this gap in literature on Bawa's discourses. First, and I think most importantly, it is an issue of

language as all of Bawa's recorded oral discourses are in Tamil. Bawa also layered languages using Qur'anic Arabic, synthesizing it with Tamil, along with the occasional use of Sanskrit and English words and phrases. Bawa's teachings on cosmologies maintain multiple layers of meanings, both within the tradition of Islam and Hinduism and also within various linguistic traditions of Tamil and Arabic. For instance, Bawa discusses *nur* (light) as an important state of being and quality of Allah in Islamic theological understanding. In Tamil *nuru* is the number for one hundred and Bawa develops it thematically as a whole, perfected number and a state of being, using both the Arabic-Islamic understanding of *nur* and Tamil understanding of *nuru*. It is surely due to the use of multiple languages and references to different cultural and religious traditions that make the interpretations of Bawa unique, multilayered and even convoluted at times.

Language aside, Bawa's discourses also took place over hours and manifested in sporadic forms of songs, stories, question and answer sessions, and lectures. Bawa's teachings explored themes of mystical numerologies, esoteric letters, sacred grammar, cosmologies, elemental natures (earth, fire, water and air), angelology and mystical prophetology, Qur'anic and hadith traditions (i.e., stories of Musa and Khidr), and referenced Hinduism (in which he emphasized aspects of *maya*, or illusion), Zoroastrianism and Christianity. Thus Bawa's discourses require studies unto themselves, in Tamil.

His discourses could be a starting point to understanding the metaphysical topography of the transnational linkages between North American, South Asian (Sri Lankan) and Middle Eastern Sufi traditions. It is clear that Bawa's discourses are steeped within the Qur'anic tradition, especially in terms of the references to prophets and angels, but Bawa's discussion of the *nabimurgal* (prophetic people) for example, is presented differently from the traditional



stories as in the case with the discussion of Khidr. Bawa also does not seem to cite from any particular *hadith* traditions or schools of law but the Fellowship is associated with the Qadiri Sufi lineage. This is where Bawa's teachings and cosmological systems should be compared to teachings of Abdul Qadir Jilani, as Jilani is the only teacher and tradition that Bawa regularly associated with. Chapter 4 highlighted Jilani's presence in Sufism in Sri Lanka, especially spatially, but what are the similarities and differences between Jilani and Bawa?

One sees in Bawa's teachings a synthesis of Hindu traditions, South Asian cultural norms and Tamil merged with Arabic and Sanskrit languages as well as North American cultural practices and norms i.e., references to films and television shows. Exploration of these teachings by Bawa suggests a Tamil-Islamic Sufi orientation with universalistic and inclusive teachings but further study is required to probe these interpretations. These potential projects are important as they would aid to broaden ongoing discussions of Sufi traditions in North America as well as to help develop a lexicon that highlights the linguistic and mystical features of Arabic, Tamil and Sanskrit that are evident in Bawa's repertoire.

The shared themes of Hindu and Islamic cosmology and theology in Bawa's teachings also require further treatment perhaps by those with specialist training in Hindu cosmology and cosmography to provide a more nuanced analysis of Bawa's teachings within Hindu cosmogonies and frameworks. Not only would this contribute to the deeper analysis of Bawa's teachings, it would highlight the historical sharing of Hindu and Islamic mystical traditions in Sri Lanka. This is an arena in which cosmological and metaphysical studies of Islamic-Sufism are desperately in need of attention. Moreover, Bawa's teachings of his *dhikr*, and its development in Sri Lanka and America can also further aid this process of understanding how his teachings localized and transformed in his respective communities.

My study also contributes to the field of Sufism in North America. It is my hope that future studies of Sufism in North America will focus on Sufi communities, spaces, personalities and rituals creatively and push the boundaries of current frameworks by forging new paradigms through multi-method and multi-site approaches. The field of Sufism in North America no longer requires general overviews of Sufism, but necessitates in-depth and focused studies that capture complexity and defy categories. Case study approaches allow for this possibility because individuals serve best as starting points to understanding the multiplicity in Sufism. Exemplary here is the site of Bawa's *mazar*, which I have only begun to unpack, and thus future research at this site will be crucial especially in relation to the parallel Sri Lanka site both in the development of the Fellowship but also in the importance of shrine culture in North America and transnationally. The arrival of pilgrims from varying cultural and, at times, religious backgrounds and the development of multiple interpretations of a singular site calls for this kind of multi-dimensional analysis.

At the same time, comparisons between Sufi shrines in North America, such as that of Bawa with Sufi Sam in New Mexico or Hazrat Shah Maghsoud in California can further help us understand distinctive shrine practices and their emergence in North America and beyond it. An illustration of this can be found in a case study analysis of both Bawa and Hazrat Inayat Khan, because they represent specifically South Asian trends in the development of Sufism in North America. Bawa's shrine in America and Khan's shrine in New Delhi, India and the movement of disciples between their respective shrines would also add new depth to the legacies of Sufi teachers with North American connections but also to pilgrimage studies and religious networks, specifically in contemporary global Sufi contexts. It is such research that I hope to complete in the future.

Another worthwhile project is to concentrate on the different demographics of the members of the Fellowship. I noted this in Chapter 9, in the discussion of generational divides in the outlooks of the Fellowship, especially of children born into Sufi communities in North America. This forms a significant cohort of Sufi communities across America and thus their relationship to their inherited identities and their understanding of Sufism is a critical development to follow up on in future studies. Exploration of the children born into the Fellowship can be critical for study, as they can be the crucible against which much of early theories of Sufism in North America can be tested and the future of Sufism in North America is projected. As Geaves mentions: “[...] the allegiance of young European and North American children of migrants reassess their parents’ and grandparents’ Sufism in the light of their in-between status in Western society” must be re-examined (Geaves 2015, 255).

Aside from generational factors, the presence of women in Sufism in North America warrants its own study. As I noted in Chapter 8, Sufi women are not only active in Sufi communities, but beyond it in Muslim associations and activist networks. They are representative of female roles, either as *shaykhas* of spiritual communities or activists in the public sphere. How women negotiate their relationship to Sufism and Islam in light of their gender identities in North America can greatly aid our understandings of the ways in which women define Sufism in sacred and secular spaces in North America.

Finally more in-depth and focused studies allow us to examine distinct developments of Sufism regionally across Canadian and American Sufism communities. For instance, if there is a distinctively “American Sufism” then what does “Canadian Sufism” look like? Thus pushing the boundaries of our approaches to create critical analysis of regional development of Sufism will allow us to not only speak about Sufism broadly in North America, but will also result in a new

tier of scholarship that provides a microscopic analysis of individual communities and their distinctiveness in every day reality.

### **Broader Significance**

This exploration has drawn attention to the broader historical presence of Sufism in the North American context through the case study of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. In the process it has become evident that the historical precedent of Sufism and its contemporary reality is one in which there were dialogical encounters between presentations of Sufism in a non-religious and non-creedal form of universalism and as a spiritual ethos that was uniquely Islamic. These internal negotiations, dynamisms and fluidities of Sufism sometimes are positioned against notions of Islamic authenticity. Although scholarship and those in the community contend with these questions of authority, legitimacy and orthodoxy, this inherent plurality has been the acclaim of Sufism in its historical and formative periods across Islamic civilizations, and it should not come as a surprise that it is any different in North America.

Thinking of Sufism through this trajectory of both expansive and subtle continuities and discontinuities captures the fluidity and dynamic formations of Sufism. This framework also moves it away from approaching Sufism as a reified and static entity. I noted the global diversity of a Sufi community from Sri Lanka to the United States through engagement with distinct Muslim, Hindu, Jewish and Christian followers. Capturing the flows and networks of people between the sacred spaces of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, which included mosques, burial shrines and community centers, allowed for the elucidation of the diverse manifestations of Sufism, not only in North America, but also in a global context.

The study of Sufism in this capacity also speaks to the ways in which scholars approach

Religious Studies as a discipline generally. The case study highlights the significance of lived religions as inherently diverse. Scholars should welcome an approach that engages with productive tensions on the ground, and not aim to categorize and demarcate religious identities through uniformity. Individuals who practice religion(s) maintain agency and ascribe meaning to their actions that challenge homogenous categories and labels that scholars can theorize and impose. It is the full encounter of the everyday that unearths complexity but that can also be disorientating for scholars of religion. This is why the Religious Studies scholar Robert Orsi (2005) advocated, the “third way”, one that is between “heaven” and “earth,” this liminal position of the scholar who goes forth into a field to encounter. It is in these moments of “radically destabilizing possibilities of a genuine encounter with an unfamiliar way of life” (Orsi 2005, 198) that brings forth the great moments of impacts in how we perceive the world and how we choose to tell new narratives, or retell forgotten ones. This of course “necessarily entails risk, vulnerability, vertigo; it invites anger and creates distress” (204) but it is this “dialectic” between the self and the other; between new paradigms and old ones, between the dead and the living, that we were reminded of as we followed in the footsteps of Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen from Pennsylvania to Jaffna, and back again.

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